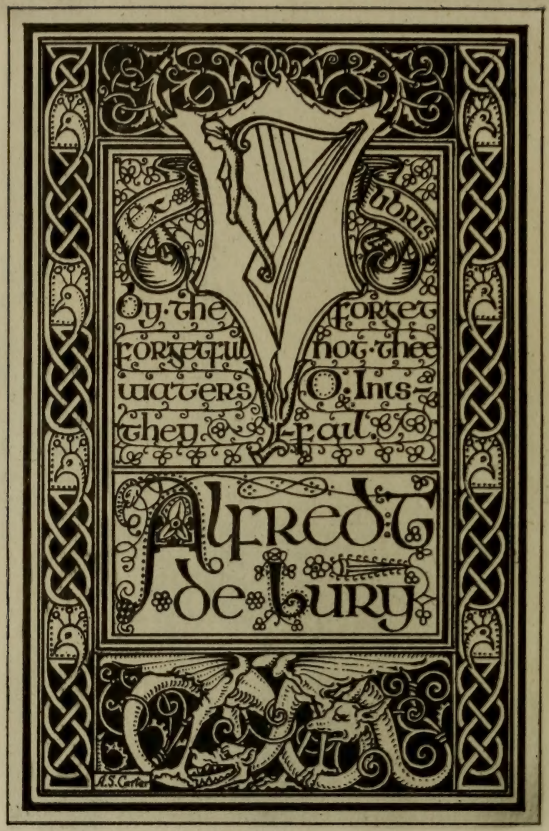
# NANCY IN THE WOOD

## By MARION BRYCE

SPECIAL LINE IN SEVEN LEAGUED BOOTS
GLASS SLIPPERS MADE TO ORDER ONLY
OUR FAMOUS DANCING WILL NOT WEAR OUT
THE VERY THING FOR FISHING-BOOTS

Illustrated by K. CLAUSEN

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A CLEARING WHERE ANEMONES AND PRIMROSES GREW

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## CHAPTER I

# THE BLACKBIRDS

THE trees grew thick and tall all round; the bushes under them were covered with young leaves; for it was the spring of the year when all the plants put on their new green clothes that the fairies make for them in the winter.

You see, there is such a long, dark time in the winter when the fairies can't go out much, because their own dresses are such very thin ones; and so they have to stay indoors a terrible lot, and when they see from the window how cold all the poor trees look, standing shivering in the wind without any leaves, they are so sorry for them that they set to work, and cut out, and sew, and darn, and mend all the old leaves into quite as good as new ones. They paint them with beautiful fresh paint, and hang them on the twigs and branches

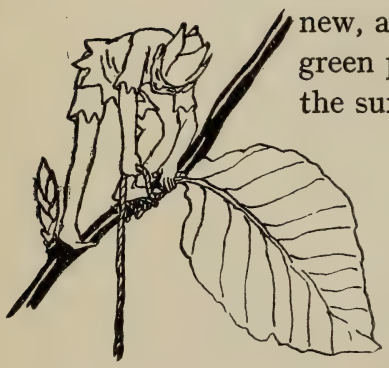
till everything is green again, and people say that the spring has come.

Spring herself, is, as you know, a young and beautiful lady who is distressingly unpunctual in her habits, so that you never quite know when to expect her. Suddenly one day the fairies look out, and there she is coming down the path, calling to them to hurry up and dress the trees, because they have been a very long while at work, she says, and surely they must be ready by now.

Some of the fairies are ready and waiting for her, and they run out of their houses and hang up the leaves they have made, and the others who haven't quite finished, are ashamed of themselves for being late, and they work harder than ever till at last everything is done.

Then Spring goes on over the hill, while the elves help the flowers to struggle out of the ground in time to see her before she has gone out of sight.

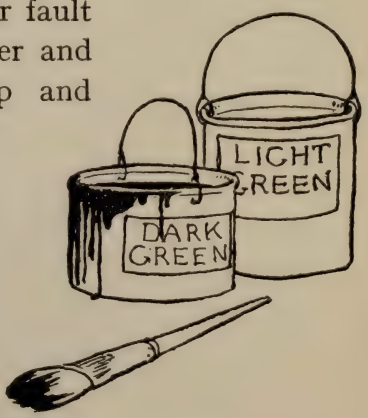
The fairies are tremendously pleased when they have done all their work and made the trees look as good as new, and they touch up the leaves with a brush full of green paint every morning till they get tired of it, and the summer has come, and the sun shines all day.



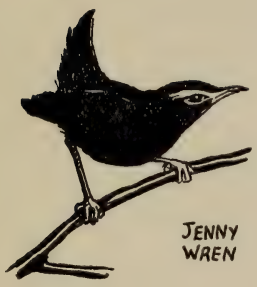
Then they say it is too hot to do any more painting, and they go and dance in the clear spaces near where the flowers grow, and swing on the twigs when the wind blows, and enjoy themselves so much that they forget all about the trees, so that gradually the paint wears off the leaves and they turn into old, dry brown ones again.

The trees shake them off in the autumn, and when winter comes, there they are as bare as last year. And cold and shuddering they would remain, if it were not that the fairies feel cold too, and that reminds them of the poor trees and they are sorry they have so neglected them.

They scurry into their houses, where the elves light the glowworm lamps, (they catch the glow-worms on summer nights and tame them till they come and live in the houses as pets and let them use their lamps in the winter,) and they make little fires for the fairies to warm their little cold hands and toes, and there they sit so comfy and remember that it is all their fault that the leaves are gone, and they get sorrier and sorrier, till at last the Fairy Queen gets up and cries out :



"To work, to work! We have let the woods get into this dreadful winter state again, and there's nothing for it but to set to and furbish the whole place up as usual."




And she calls for volunteers to go and fetch in dead leaves to make new ones out of, but none of the fairies ever dare go because they are afraid their noses would be bitten off by their enemy, Jack Frost, once they put them outside the door.

The truth is, that that is what happened the only time one of them was so rash as to do it on a very cold day, and if it hadn't been for Jenny Wren who was passing at the time, and had luckily had some experience in the matter of popping the maid's nose on again when the blackbird bit it off, that day when the Queen ate all the honey while the King was counting his gold pieces—if it hadn't been for Jenny Wren, as I was saying, there's no knowing whether that poor fairy wouldn't have lost her nose for good.

So they call down the cellar stairs to the hobgoblins and gnomes who live underground, and ask them to get the earth-worms to go out and draw in some leaves, and the worms do this because the fairies are always

kind to them and often warn them if they see a fat thrush or robin coming, though this annoys the birds very much.

As I began to tell you, Spring had come some days before, and the bushes had already lots of new leaves hanging on them.

The trees grew thick and tall all round, but in one place there was a clearing with only a few clumps of hazel and thorn. Under these anemones and primroses grew near together, and a little girl was picking them so eagerly that she didn't notice that her nurse had gone on and was out of sight in the thicker part of the wood.

Nancy—that was her name—had picked a big bunch, as big as she could hold, before she looked up and found herself alone. She called, but there was no answer.

She ran round and round the little clearing, trying to peer between the tree trunks, and wondering which way her nurse had gone.

Now if one runs round a circle of a certain size, (which varies every day according to the age of the moon, so that when the moon is full the circle is a large one, and when it's a new moon you need only turn yourself round and the circle is big enough), if you run

round exactly the right sized circle as many times as the moon is days old, a sudden wonderful magic change comes over you, and you can not only see fairies, but you can understand the birds and animals talking, and all kinds of magic things.

It is almost impossible to do this on purpose, because no one knows just how big the circle ought to be, as a rule, but lots of people can tell you the age of the moon if they had a calendar given them last Christmas, and it is worth trying or not, as you like.

Nancy, of course, did it entirely by accident, which is always the best and most satisfactory way. She wasn't thinking at all about magic, but simply ran round the clearing in a circle because she didn't know which way to go, and she happened to stop after exactly the right number of rounds. At all events, she suddenly began to hear voices all about her, and listening for a moment she realised that they came from the branches of the trees, and from the ground and the bushes. From one bush just behind her, she was startled to hear a plaintive voice exclaim :

"Dear me, Blackbird, what a long time you've been away ! I do hope you are going to whistle now. I get

so dull and depressed without any music." And looking round she saw in the bush a large nest, on which was sitting a dark brown bird, with shining eyes fixed reproachfully on her husband, Mr. Blackbird, who at that instant settled with a flop on a twig just above the nest.

"I shall be delighted to whistle, my dear, if it gives you any pleasure," said Mr. Blackbird, and he hopped to a higher branch and drew a long breath. He began to whistle most beautifully, and both Mrs. Blackbird and Nancy enjoyed it very much. Suddenly, however, he caught sight of Nancy and stopped, alarmed by the presence of a human being so near his nest.

"Don't please be frightened," cried Nancy, "and don't stop your lovely song!" To her surprise, she heard herself speaking the bird language. Mr. Blackbird looked much relieved, and hopping down again spread out his wings and made a most polite bow. He was a very smart, shining black person. His beak was golden yellow, and he was as neat and tidy as a new pin.

"How do you do," he said. "So glad you like my song. We are a very musical family; I only wish you could hear my poor brother. But I am sorry to say he

has lately had an adventure with a cat"—here he paused and wiped away a tear—"a cat, in fact, carried his wife off her nest a week ago to-morrow, and he has naturally not had the heart to sing since."

"What a dreadful thing," murmured Nancy, while Mrs. Blackbird shivered and no doubt turned pale beneath her feathers.

"I can't admit that he sings any better than you, my dear," she remarked, "and I must say that I think it would have been better if he'd given more time and thought to choosing a good, safe, well-hidden place to build the nest in, and not so much to practicing trills. Nothing," she went on, turning to Nancy, "nothing is so important as concealing your nest thoroughly."

Nancy looked with interest at the nest. It was carefully placed in the middle of the bush where the branches and twigs were thickest, and would be quite invisible when a few more leaves had come out.

It was made of moss and grass, and a little wool, which she recognised as belonging to the sheep in the meadow near by, was tucked into the sides. One large piece, however, had caught on the thorns an inch or two from the nest, and hung out like a flag, quite notice-

able from a distance ; she wondered that Mr. and Mrs. Blackbird who looked so spick and span, should have built a nest which she thought rather untidy. Mrs. Blackbird saw that she was looking at the wool, and glanced uneasily at her husband.

"I know what you are looking at," she said, "and I know what you're thinking about. It's that piece of wool. It's been a great worry to us. Blackbird got it off a sheep hurdle, and it was as much as he could do to get it here, it's so big and heavy. We didn't really need it, but he thought it would give a smart look to the whole thing, as none of the other birds ever got such a big piece ; but when we tried to carry it in, it caught on the thorns, and the more we pulled the more it stuck, the tiresome thing, and there it is, as large as life and twice as white. Do you really think it shows much ?" she asked anxiously.

Nancy hardly knew what to say so as to be both polite and truthful.

"Perhaps when the leaves come out more," she began—

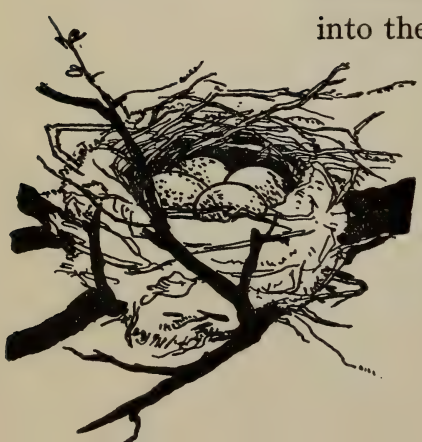
"Exactly what I say," cried Mr. Blackbird, triumphantly; "when there are more leaves it will be completely hidden. I've been getting together some down and

feathers to-day, and presently I shall carry them up to one of the fairies who I know is wanting some for her bed ; and I shall take the opportunity of begging her to put a few extra leaves on this side of the bush ; then the wool will be quite covered up. My wife is too much given to fussing over trifles," he added, "you really must excuse her."

"Well, I like that ! exclaimed Mrs. Blackbird indignantly, and ruffling her feathers, "it's all very fine for you, who go to sleep comfortably on the top of the bush out of the reach of cats and weasels ! But I have to sit here all night and keep my eggs warm, which is hard enough work, I can tell you, without your hanging out great woollen signals to show the horrid beasts where I am !"

"Oh ! are you sitting on your eggs !" cried Nancy, hoping to divert poor Mrs. Blackbird from her fears. "I should love to see them. Might I peep for a minute?

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," replied the lady, for she liked nothing better than to show her eggs to anyone who would admire them ; she hopped off the nest and Nancy stood on tiptoe and put her head carefully into the thorn bush. She could just see into the nest ;



it was nicely lined with dry grass, and at the bottom were four green eggs covered with splashes of brown. She longed to touch them, but both birds frowned so when she put her hands towards the nest, that she drew them back quickly and only gazed.

"What beautiful eggs!" she said, and Mrs. Blackbird smiled with delight.

"They are beautiful" she replied, "though I say it that shouldn't. That one," she went on, pointing to one of the eggs, "is the very image of the one I came out of when my dear mother hatched me three years ago. How well I remember waiting till my beak got strong enough to break through the shell! I heard my brothers and sisters tap, tap, tapping, and at last all were out except me. I was very frightened that I should not be hatched at all and that my parents might think I was addled and throw me away. But just when I was almost in despair, I felt I was growing stronger; my beak, which had been so soft, grew hard, and I was soon able to peck a hole in my egg. I turned out the biggest, and, if I may say so, ahem, the best looking of my family."

Nancy couldn't help thinking she was rather a vain

bird ; still, she liked her very much in spite of it and thought it was very kind of her to let her see the eggs.

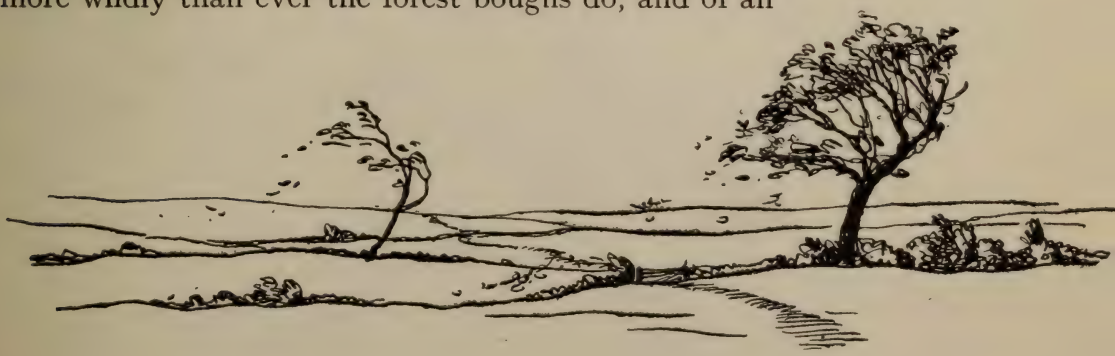
"It must be so nice," she said, "to live out here in the wood and never have to go indoors. I wish I had a soft, warm nest hung up in a tree, where I could hear the wind talking to the branches all night."

"It's very pleasant when the weather is good," said Mr. Blackbird, "but we don't listen more than we can help ; we get up so early that there is very little time to sleep, without wasting it listening to the winds, who are forever talking about all sorts of things that couldn't interest anyone. The North Wind, for instance, he talks of nothing but the cold, cold winter places he comes from. Who wants to hear about snow, and bears, and seals, and ships caught between great hills of ice, and broken up by them as a nut is cracked in a squirrel's teeth ? Very chilly and dismal kind of talk, I call it."

"I think I should like to hear about the bears and seals," said Nancy. "What do the other winds talk of ?"

"Well, the East Wind doesn't have as much to say as the others," continued the bird, "at least not here in

the wood. I'm told he has a dreadful temper, and out in the fields he screams and scolds sometimes for days on end. He's nearly always cross, anyway, and grumbles at everything. Poor fellow, I believe it's a cruel climate where he comes from, and his health is not what it used to be. I've known him very agreeable indeed on a hot summer's day, but he hates cold weather, and he's so unlucky! It is nearly always colder than usual the day he comes. The West Wind is a much more cheerful person; I'm always glad to find him about. A bit rough in his manners, perhaps, but full of fun, and generally brings good news. Sometimes he tells you there's a thaw coming; that's when the East Wind has been here lately, or his brother from the North has left the ground hard and frozen, and not an insect or a worm showing itself for us poor feathered people to live on. Sometimes he has seen Spring herself on her way to us, and cheers us up by telling us so; but in the winter, even he has other tales to tell only too often, and I have been kept awake all night by his tiresome songs of how he blows on the sea till all the water gets heaped up into great waves, and tosses about more wildly than ever the forest boughs do, and of all



the ships that are on it and have to go up and down as the waves send them, till he gets tired and leaves off blowing. He loves to see them dance to his music, he says, the great mischievous, stupid giant! No, the only one I really care for is the wind from the South."

"What's he like?" asked Nancy.

"He's a very different sort of fellow, I assure you. A perfect gentleman, I call him. Not but what he's as strong as any of his brothers, if he exerts himself, but he doesn't rush about trying to show off the whole time, which, in my opinion, is a contemptible proceeding for anyone!"

Mr. Blackbird paused and shook himself till his feathers bristled out, and he looked so fierce that poor Nancy wondered if he thought she had tried to show off. She knew she hadn't, though, and as he suddenly calmed down again and beamed at her, she felt reassured.

"The South Wind," he went on, "just strolls quietly through the wood, and is always stopping for a game with anyone he can find to play with him. He sings such lovely songs too, about beautiful countries where Jack Frost never goes; where the earth is always soft,

and there is heaps and heaps to eat, and everyone is happy all day long. Now that's what I call a good sort of song. Not too loud either, so that you can sleep through it comfortably if you want to. Lots of birds lie awake though, and listen and listen ; and after he is gone they can think of nothing else, so that when food gets scarcer, and the days darker and colder, they hear the North Wind coming one morning and cry out all together, "This is our chance to get blown away to the South Wind's country," and up they get, and off they fly."

"Do they ever come back ? " asked Nancy.

"Oh yes ! they come back, a great many of them," replied the bird, "they find there are other things in the South besides any amount of sunshine and insects. There is too much sunshine sometimes, and the earth there gets as hard as it does here when Jack Frost comes. And there they have more enemies than here, if possible. If you will believe me, there are even men who shoot us song birds with guns, which I am glad to say they have enough decency not to do here. But this is a painful subject ; my wife can't bear me to speak of it."

Indeed poor Mrs. Blackbird was looking very unhappy, and she seemed relieved when Nancy interrupted her husband by exclaiming :

"Do tell me more about the South Wind."

"They say he is the same age as the other three," continued Mr. Blackbird, "but he looks much younger, and he dresses in much prettier colours. The North Wind wears blue, and the East Wind has a red and white and gold dress ; very beautiful, certainly, but rather glaring ; the West Wind is always in grey, but the South Wind never wears the same dress twice. Sometimes he is in clothes the colour of the roses in the garden, sometimes in green like the colour of the young beech leaves, sometimes in white and green like the silver poplars, or purple and cream colour like the wood orchis. Sometimes he has a dress that seems to change as he moves ; but whichever it is, it is always lovely to see, and he moves so gently, he never disturbs anyone in the forest. Ah ! he is the wind that the fairies love !"

"Oh, the fairies !" exclaimed Nancy, "are there many fairies about here ? I am always looking for them, but I have never seen one."

"Never seen a fairy !" said Mr. and Mrs. Blackbird

together. "Goodness gracious, where have you been? why, one can see dozens here any moonlight night!"

"Of course, you know, I am in bed on moonlight nights," said Nancy sadly. "And on other nights too."

"In that case," said the birds, "you naturally don't see them unless you call upon them."

"But in the daytime," added Mr. Blackbird, "they are generally asleep, so it isn't a very good time to call."

Nancy looked very disappointed and Mr. Blackbird said kindly,

"There is a Dryad who lives in that oak, or rather, a Hamadryad, to give her her full title. She hardly ever sleeps at this time of the year, and I will take you to call on her one morning if you like, and introduce you."

"Oh, will you really!" cried Nancy in delight, "how very good of you. Dear Mr. Blackbird, when shall I come?"

"Any day you like," said he, "but you know you must run round the magic circle the right number of times, or it will be no good."

As he spoke there was a slight crackling noise from the path, and he and Mrs. Blackbird started up with

scared looks and suddenly flew off chattering with fright. Nancy glanced behind her, and there was her nurse coming quickly towards her.

"Where ever have you been, Miss Nancy?" she cried, "I thought you'd gone down the other path, and I've been hunting the whole wood for you."

"I have only been here all the time," replied the child, "I called you, but you did not hear. I knew you would come back, so I stayed here." But she did not say anything about the blackbirds, as she thought her nurse might not understand that she had really been talking to them.

As they started towards home she looked back and caught sight of the piece of white wool waving over the nest; she wondered her nurse had not seen it. A moment later she heard the whistle of a blackbird, and looking up saw her friend perched high on a far off bough. She tried to wave her hand to him, but he did not look towards her at all, and she suddenly noticed that she could no longer understand what he was singing.

How quickly she seemed to have forgotten the bird language.

## CHAPTER II

# THE HAMADRYAD

THE next day, as they were passing the clearing in the wood, Nancy said to her nurse.

"Do let me stay and play here, I don't want to go any further."

"Don't you want to come on to that nice stile by the road ?" asked her nurse, surprised, for Nancy generally liked the stile. "We can sit there and see the motors passing, and the people on bicycles, and horses and carts,"

"I'd much rather stay here, please," said Nancy again, "you go on to the stile, and I won't get into any mischief, and be as good as gold here."

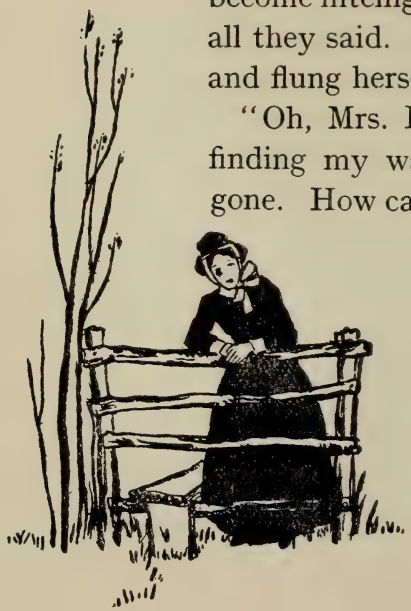
"You're a strange child," said her nurse, hesitating. She wanted to sit on the stile herself, for she liked to look at the people passing, and sometimes she saw a

friend go by ; it was hardly fifty yards further on, but just out of sight, round a clump of trees and bushes. She looked round the clearing ; it seemed a safe enough place, there was no way, that she could see, in which the child could come to any harm ; besides she was such a good little girl, and could be trusted almost anywhere.

"I can hear you if you call," she said. "Don't go father away than this, and you may stay here." And she went on alone.

As soon as she had gone Nancy began to run round in circles as she had done the day before, but alas ! she couldn't do it right now. Either she didn't do it the proper number of times, or the size of the circle was wrong. At all events it was not till nearly dinner time that, just as she was giving it up in despair, she stopped suddenly, and realised that the voices of the birds had become intelligible to her. Again, she could understand all they said. She ran to the bush where the nest was, and flung herself panting beneath it.

"Oh, Mrs. Blackbird," she cried, "I've been hours finding my way to Birdland, and all the morning is gone. How can I come quicker to-morrow ?"



"Poor child," said Mrs. Blackbird, "you do look tired. Running round the circle is certainly a very exhausting way to get to our country, unless you are a mathematician, and they hardly ever want to come. There is a short way in, but if I teach it to you, I must trust you with something very precious. Are you sure you wouldn't lose it?"

"I'd be as careful as careful," cried Nancy.

Mrs. Blackbird got up and hunted in a secret corner of the nest, from which she presently drew out a small white feather.

"This," she said, "is a feather from the tail of my great, great grandfather's cousin, who was a pure white blackbird. When he died he left a feather to each of his relations, and of course they are most precious, as not only are white blackbirds very rare, but their feathers have the property of helping people to understand things; so that if you hold it in your hand and say: 'Oh, feather, I want to understand bird talk, and beast talk, and fairy talk,' and at the same time bow, first to the East, then to the South, the West and the North, you will reach us by the short way, and it will save you a lot of time and trouble. Now I hear your nurse coming, so you must go."

So saying, she pressed the feather into Nancy's hand and signed to her to move away, as the nurse appeared, calling that it was time to go in.

The next day everything went well. Nancy was left in the clearing, she held the feather in her hand, and, bowing to the East, South, West, and North, said aloud, "Oh feather! I want to understand bird talk, and beast talk, and fairy talk." And lo and behold! in a moment she understood them perfectly. In great delight she ran to the nest, but stopped short on seeing the two birds sitting on a branch a little way off, both looking quite miserable, and Mrs. Blackbird in floods of tears.

"Oh dear, what is the matter?" said Nancy. "Dear Mrs. Blackbird, what has happened?"

"Our beautiful eggs," sobbed the bird, "our lovely, wonderful eggs"——and wept again.

"Stolen," said her husband shortly, and turned to comfort his wife.

"How dreadful," said Nancy. "How did it happen? Who stole them?"

Mrs. Blackbird dried her eyes and answered in a chokey voice.

"I was sitting on the nest as usual about an hour ago,

when I heard, to my disgust, the horrid sound of boys talking. It's a sound that always makes me shudder, and I sat as still as I could for trembling, and hoped they might pass quickly by. On they came, two of them, nasty curly haired things with round, red faces, and blue eyes that you would never think could be so cruel; they got half way across the clearing, and I was just beginning to breathe again, when one of them stopped and pointed at our thorn bush."

"See that great lump of wool," he said to the other; "I bet some silly old bird's got a nest not far off, and got the wool caught up on the thorns when he was trying to get it to the nest; let's look."

And as he spoke he walked quickly towards me. I was terribly frightened, but I sat tight to guard my dear eggs till I actually saw his face not a yard from me, and his hands put up to part the leaves and look into the bush. Then I couldn't bear it any longer, and I flew off to warn all the other wood people that there were boys about. Blackbird came flying to join me, and from that tree over there we watched our beautiful eggs taken away, and our nest pulled out and thrown on the ground."

The recollection was too much for her and she burst into tears once more. Her husband and Nancy tried to comfort her, but she wouldn't listen to anything they said, and only begged them to leave her alone.

"I shall feel better presently," she said, "do go away, you two, and let me cry in peace!"

So Nancy and Mr. Blackbird wandered off together into the wood, both feeling very sad at the thought of the tragedy that had taken place.

"Poor, poor Mrs. Blackbird," said the child, I wish I could find those horrid boys and make them bring back the eggs."

"It would be of no use, my dear," Mr. Blackbird answered sorrowfully; "they would be quite cold by now, and no birds could ever be hatched from them. No. We shall have to set to work and build ourselves a new nest. You'll see, my wife will cheer up in a day or two, and next time we must choose a better hiding place, and not," he added bitterly, "hang a large white flag over it to mark the spot."

"Oh! and I will help you," cried Nancy, "I can tear up the wool into small pieces, and fetch you sticks, and be, oh! so useful!"

"That will be very nice, I'm sure," said Mr. Blackbird, smiling, "and you must not think that my wife does not appreciate your sympathy, only just now, she can't bear to see you, because, you know, you are human, and remind her too much of the boys; while as for me, she can't forgive me yet for having brought the piece of wool to the bush, and no wonder. So we must keep out of the way for a bit, till she has calmed down a little, and I will try and find something to amuse you in the meantime. You are too young to ponder over our misfortunes. What would you like me to show you?

"You did say you would take me to see a Dryad," murmured Nancy, "but perhaps you don't feel inclined to now."

"To be sure I did," the bird answered, "it will do me good and distract my mind! come along," and he led the way, fluttering from branch to branch, till they stood before the largest oak in the wood, a huge, gnarled monster, with twisted, crooked boughs reaching in all directions, and little knotty twigs striking out from the branches, but hardly a leaf on any of them yet.

"Curtsey three times," remarked Mr. Blackbird, "as

soon as I present you, and perhaps she will allow you to kiss her hand,"

So saying he hopped to the foot of the tree and pecked at the bark. Peck peck, peck peck, peck peck! It sounded something like a postman's knock. Then he drew back, shook out his feathers, and waited expectantly. In a moment there was a sound of a bolt being drawn, and a little door, so neatly hidden in the bark of the tree that you would never have noticed it, was thrown open, and there, in the doorway, stood a most wonderful little lady not more than an inch high, but more beautiful than anyone Nancy had ever seen.

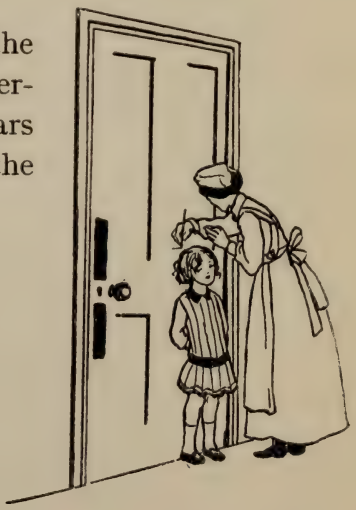
She wore a dress of the filmy stuff all the fairy people wear, and Nancy couldn't be sure if it was brown, or blue, or yellowy green, for it was like the mist you sometimes see hanging over the fields in the autumn, and it was like the shadows of leaves dancing in the sun, and it was like the soft, grey lichen that grows on the oak tree's bark, and sometimes you could see it and sometimes you couldn't, but as a rule you just could; and through it shone the yellow brown skin of the fairy, and over it fell her red brown hair. She smiled at the blackbird, but glanced rather timidly up at Nancy.

"Good morning, Lady of the oak," said the bird, stepping forward with a low bow. "This," he continued, cocking his tail, and waving a claw towards his companion, "this is Nancy, a little human child, or I should perhaps say," he added, glancing doubtfully up, "a very large human child, who is most anxious to be presented to your ladyship."

"She is large, certainly," said the Dryad, as Nancy curtsied hastily three times. "Still, I am delighted to see her. Are you always so very big?" she enquired, holding out her hand which was so small Nancy was almost afraid to kiss it.

"I'm generally about this size I think,"she answered politely. "I'm afraid it is rather large. I was smaller a month ago. I know, because I was measured against the nursery door yesterday, and nurse said I had grown half-an-inch. And once I was a tiny baby, but I don't remember that very well, because, of course, it was such an enormous time ago."

"Ah, it is hard to remember everything," agreed the Dryad, "but I must say I remember being born perfectly well, myself; it was about three hundred years ago, and on a fine morning like this, but earlier in the



year, and the hunters were riding through the forest. First came the deer running for his life, his horns laid tightly back against his neck for fear they might catch in the trees. Then the hounds, their noses near the ground to follow his track by the scent of his footprints; then the riders, lords and ladies, and men dressed in green, and blowing horns, all galloping by, in and out of the glades, down the hill and through the brook, till they disappeared over the rising ground opposite. Last of all came two people riding more slowly ; one was a very handsome young man, who was talking eagerly to the lady beside him. But she only laughed at what he said, and presently touched her horse and galloped on, leaving him standing in the path looking very sorrowful. She must have felt she had been unkind, for before she was out of sight, she turned and blew him a kiss over her shoulder, and his face brightened and he too rode on. But the South Wind, who was wandering in the forest, caught the kiss as the lady threw it, and popped it in between an acorn and its cup, where it was wedged so tightly it couldn't escape. And from that kiss I was born, and when the acorn, with the lapse of years, grew to be an oak, I grew too inside it, and have stayed with it always."

Nancy could hardly believe the Dryad was three hundred years old ; she gazed at her with the deepest interest.

"Do you really remember all that," she asked, and was just going to add, "I don't see how you can remember what happened before the lady blew him the kiss," when the blackbird gave her a sharp peck in the leg which effectually stopped her from continuing the subject.

"The South Wind has often talked to me about it since," the Dryad was saying, when she had recovered enough to listen again, "but of course I recollect it all perfectly. I should like to ask you into the tree," she went on, "but I fear you could never get in if you stay so big. I wonder if you have any objection to my reducing your size for a time ?" and she waved her wand tentatively to and fro.

"Not in the least, it would be most kind of you," murmured Nancy, wondering what it would feel like to be made smaller. She soon knew, for the Dryad waved her wand and spoke a fairy word. If it was not Hey Presto ! it was something very much like it, and in a moment, instead of being a little over four foot tall,

Nancy found her head nearly level with the fairy's, just about an inch from the ground. She was able to step into the tree, and in they went, followed by the blackbird.

At first it seemed rather dark inside, but soon she became accustomed to the green grey light that came filtering from somewhere far above, and could see quite well.

"It's a busy time in the tree now," said the Dryad. "You will have noticed that I am looking a little pale ?"

Nancy didn't quite know what to say, as she hadn't known that the Dryad was ever less pale ; but she said she hoped she wasn't feeling ill.

"Not ill, no, but a little faint," the lady answered. "You see my oak likes the sap to rise at this time of the year, and my heart, of course, is wanted for the pumping."

She opened a cupboard door as she spoke, and there was a great golden heart, pump, pumping away, seventy-two beats to the minute. It was hanging over a deep well, from which buckets of sap rose continually and emptied themselves into the wall of the tree.

"It's rather hard work," she said after a pause,

during which they all watched the buckets coming up and going down again empty. "It sometimes makes me feel a little faint," she said again, as she shut the door, "but nothing to speak of. Will you come into this room?" and she opened another door. "Here I make the wings for the caterpillars."

They went into a large room with tables and desks all round it, on which were spread great pieces of what Nancy at first thought was velvet, cut to the shape of gigantic butterfly or moth wings. But it was because she had grown so small that they looked so large.

"What caterpillars have wings like these?" she asked in astonishment.

"None of them have till I or other fairies give them to them," replied the Dryad. "You see some of us have an unfortunate dislike to caterpillars, and the nasty things will bore holes in the bark of the trees, to sleep in during the winter. They weave themselves soft cocoon blankets, and tuck themselves up and go to sleep for months, all through the cold weather. Some the woodpecker and the nuthatch and other birds come and pull out of their holes, but a great many are still there in the spring, and then they come out and crawl

about and annoy us again. So we hit on the plan of making beautiful wings for them, and we put a pair in each cocoon, so that when the chrysalis wakes up (they are called chrysalis after they have gone to sleep) when he wakes, the first things he sees are the wings laid out ready for him to wear. He is always only too delighted to have something nice, and puts them on and flies away. "Some of them come and say thank you first, but most of them are sadly ungrateful," added the Dryad, shaking her head.

"How lovely they are," said Nancy, walking round to look at the wings. "How do you make them? It must be very difficult."

"It is difficult at first, till you know how," said the fairy; "and of course one must always take a lot of trouble or they are not really nice. First there's the material. I make mine mostly of pansy petals, but I use a lot of other flowers, and thistle-down too. Then I cut it to the shape I want, and stretch it on a frame made of bits of quill from a tomtit's feathers. The tomtits are so kind about giving me feathers, and always let me have as many as I want. After that I paint the patterns and colours. Some years there are more

cocoons in the tree than others, and then I don't have time to ornament all the wings equally elaborately. That's why you see some of the moths wearing plain brown or grey ones ; but if there are only a few, I am able to spend more time on each."

She took up a brush and pointed to a pair of reddish brown wings.

"Here for instance, I shall paint blue spots, like this," and she dabbled with the brush. "And then white splotches and lines," she took up another brush, "and a black border, thus." She painted away, and Nancy watched entranced. In a few minutes the wings were beautifully decorated.

"That will be a Red Admiral butterfly," said the fairy, laying down her brush, "don't you think it is pretty ?"

"I think it's quite lovely," replied the child. "How wonderfully clever you must be to do it !"

The fairy smiled with pleasure ; she could not help liking her work to be admired, even by such a little girl.

"It is very delightful to make beautiful things," she said. "I could not bear not to do it ; but I sometimes wish there were fewer caterpillars in the world and that

I had time to make other things, just anything I fancied."

"Everything is beautiful in here," sighed Nancy, "did you make your lovely dress yourself?"

"No," replied the Dryad. "The fairy tailors, the Brownies, make all our dresses; it is a pretty stuff, is it not? Perhaps it would amuse you to see the weavers making it?"

"I should love to," said Nancy.

"There are some at the top of the tree; I daresay Mr. Blackbird would carry you up to see them if you like," said the Dryad. "I would come myself, only I am very busy, as you see; besides I never like to go far away from my heart in case anything should go wrong with the machinery. I hope you will look in again, one day. Before you go I will give you this magic acorn. You will find it useful if you should ever want to alter your size again. You see, I have painted fairy signs upon it, and if you hold it point down, and say 'Hey Presto' you will immediately become any size you wish. Good by. So glad you came. Good bye Mr. Blackbird."

So saying, the fairy opened the tree door, and they

found themselves again in the wood. The door closed noiselessly behind them, and when Nancy turned to look, she could not detect it at all, so cunningly was it fitted into the bark. She could almost have believed she had been dreaming if it had not been for the magic acorn, which she was tightly clutching. It was so large, or rather, she was so small, that it would only just go into her pocket, which it completely filled.

"If you want to come and look at the weaving," said Mr. Blackbird, "you'd better get on my back."

He stooped down and Nancy scrambled up on to his back. It was the most soft, comfy place to sit on you can imagine, and she sank nearly out of sight among the feathers.

"Don't hold on unless you feel like falling," said the bird. "I hate having my feathers pulled. Just put your feet against my tail, and you'll be all right,"

He cocked his tail, and she leant her feet against it and lay back. There was a slight spring, Mr. Blackbird's wings flapped, as it seemed, all around her, and up they went.

Up, up, up, through the air, in and out of the branches, till in a minute all was still again, and Mr. Blackbird was saying :

"Here we are! Now be careful how you get off. Sit up and hold on to that twig."

She sat up and caught hold of the twig as she was told and slid cautiously down on to the large branch they had alighted on. It seemed as wide as a road now to her, she was so small, but she was careful to walk in the middle of it, and didn't much like to look down, as it was so very far above the ground.

The blackbird hopped on in front of her, and they went down the branch to the fork of the tree. As they approached the trunk an enormous grey spider came slowly out to meet them. He did not look altogether pleased to see the blackbird, which was not surprising, for blackbirds have been known to take a short way with spiders, and he sheltered himself behind a twig as he addressed them.

"Good morning," he said. "I hope, Mr. Blackbird, that you come on a peaceful errand?"

"Certainly, certainly, Mr. Spider, "replied the bird in a patronising manner. "Pray do not feel alarmed! I have come to pay you a visit of pure friendship. Nothing else, I assure you. I wish to introduce my young friend Nancy. Que voila!" he added, with a

flourish; for he was an accomplished bird, and could talk French as well as English, having learnt more than one foreign language in his travels in far countries. The spider was much impressed, for he was not at all highly educated himself, and made Nancy a beautiful bow.

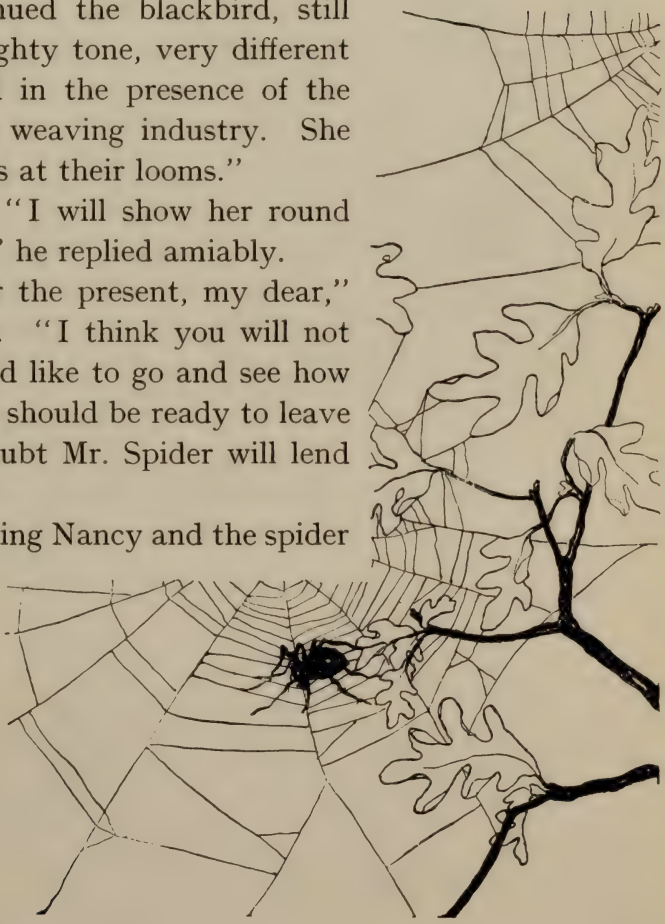
"Charmed, I'm sure," he murmured, "most kind of you to call. Anything I can do," and he vaguely waved a leg or an arm, Nancy couldn't decide which it was.

"This young lady," continued the blackbird, still speaking in a grand and haughty tone, very different to the one he had employed in the presence of the Dryad, "is interested in the weaving industry. She would like to see your workers at their looms."

The spider bowed again. "I will show her round with the greatest of pleasure," he replied amiably.

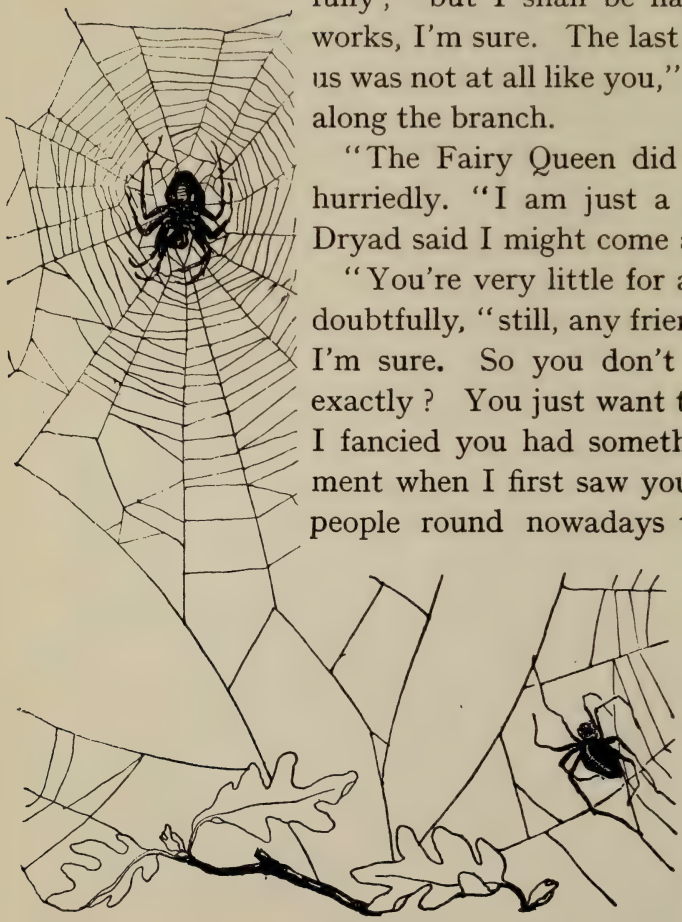
"Then I will leave you for the present, my dear," said Mr. Blackbird to Nancy. "I think you will not need me up here, and I should like to go and see how my wife is getting on. If you should be ready to leave before I am back, I've no doubt Mr. Spider will lend you a ladder to descend by."

So saying he flew away, leaving Nancy and the spider



standing on the branch. He was such a large spider, nearly half as big as she was, and with long arms and legs which spread out all round him. Nancy was not quite sure at first that she was not frightened of him, but he continued to smile at her so affably that she came to the conclusion that he was not really as fierce as he looked.

"You seem a very young lady to come and bother yourself about us weaver people," he remarked thoughtfully; "but I shall be happy to show you round the works, I'm sure. The last person the Fairy Queen sent us was not at all like you," he went on, as he led the way along the branch.



"The Fairy Queen did not send me," said Nancy, hurriedly. "I am just a little human child, and the Dryad said I might come and see you for fun."

"You're very little for a human," replied the spider doubtfully, "still, any friend of the Dryad's is welcome, I'm sure. So you don't want to inspect the works exactly? You just want to see the spinning going on? I fancied you had something to do with the Government when I first saw you; they are always sending people round nowadays to find fault with our work-

shops, or interfere in some way. Not that I mind," he added proudly, "I employ five hundred workers myself, and they work under conditions anyone might be glad of. Better, airier workshops than mine don't exist."

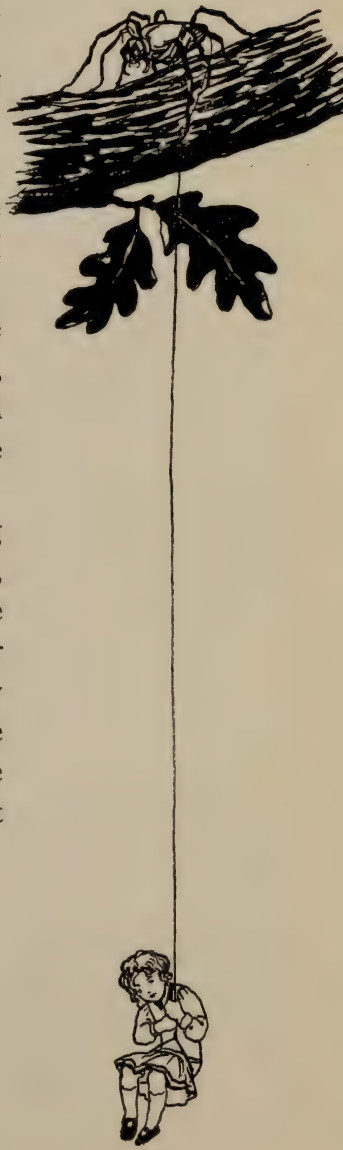
He led the way round the trunk and ran up a rope of cobweb that was hanging from the branch above.

"How am I to get up?" asked Nancy.

"Just put your foot in the loop at the end of the rope," said the spider's voice from above her, "and I will soon pull you up."

So she stepped into the loop which was there sure enough, and holding on tight to the rope with her hands, was hauled up to the bough which the spider had already reached. As he pulled her safely on to it, she saw that here were the workrooms he had spoken of.

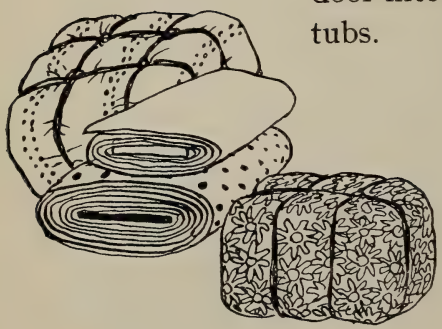
All around her, hanging from every twig and filling the spaces between the branches with misty curtains, hung cobweb fabrics of every size and texture, from the coarse, rough cobwebbing that the fairies used for carpets, to the filmy, delicate laces and gauzes that they have their clothes made of. Spiders of all sizes were busy at the spinning, running swiftly up and down the netting, weaving and knotting, and joining different



sorts of webs together. Big spiders, little spiders, fat spiders, and thin spiders.

Nancy gazed at them bewildered. As far as she could see, on all sides the work was going on so fast and the spiders were so absorbed in it that they hardly paused to glance at her.

"Very good workers, mine are," said Mr, Spider at her elbow, "the best in fairy land some say. All the court dresses are made in my shops, at least all the stuff used for them is. The Queen herself came here the other day, and chose a quantity of lace!" Mr. Spider swelled visibly with pride and gratification. "Now come with me to the rooms where we keep the finished materials." He led the way to the tree trunk, and in through a little door in the back, not unlike the entrance to the Dryad's part of the tree. They went into a large room full of cupboards and shelves on which were stacked bales and rolls of the fairy stuffs. They had all looked greyish on the looms, but here were all the colours of the rainbow. Nancy asked why this was, and before answering, Mr. Spider opened a door into another large room full of steaming vats and tubs.



A BEAUTIFUL BLUE-GREEN DYE WHICH IS MUCH SOUGHT AFTER

"This," he said, "is where we dye the stuffs. We use all kinds of dyes. See there is a roll being dipped now." He pointed to a tub over which a roll of cobweb gauze was hung from a hook in the ceiling. Two long cords supported it, and passed over the hook and down again, to form a pulley. Several spiders held the ends of the ropes, and were carefully lowering the bale into the tub.

"What colour will it be ?" asked Nancy.

"The tub is full of sea ripples caught on a sunny day," replied her guide, "they make a beautiful blue-green dye which is very much sought after ; look, it is being pulled up again," and there was the roll of gauze rising dripping from the tub as the spiders pulled on the ropes. It was now a lovely clear watery colour, just like the sea on a calm summer's day. It was hung up to the hook and left to dry, while the workers hurried to the next vat.

"That one is full of self-sacrifice," said the spider in Nancy's ear. "Things that are dipped in there come out pure gold. It is very expensive of course, as it's hard to get enough of that dye to meet the demand at any price." He passed on, pointing to a large vat which

he said was full of kisses, which produced a lovely and very becoming rose colour, and another, filled, he said, with sympathy, in which things were dyed to pale blue-greys and lilacs.

"Of course the cheapest colour," he said, "is green; that very big vat, full of jealousy, is the green one. It's easy to get enough, I can tell you, to keep that full. I wish I could get all the colours as plentifully."

By this time they had gone all round the room, and came out in a smaller place, evidently the office, where little red spiders sat behind barred counters, occupied in doing accounts, and writing busily in great brown books.

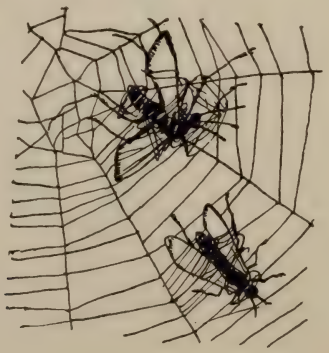
"I did love seeing it all," said Nancy, who felt she was taking up a lot of Mr. Spider's valuable time. "I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed myself. It is so kind of you to have shown me everything. Thank you so very much."

"Not at all, not at all," Mr. Spider answered graciously, "delighted I'm sure. I ought to show you one more thing," he said, as they came out again on the branch; "come this way;" and he began to go quickly along a large bough that stretched out further, almost,

than any of the others. They went along it nearly to the end, where it was quite thin, and swayed under their steps so that Nancy got giddy, and Mr. Spider held both her hands, and tied a rope under her arms so that she should not fall. Then he told her to hold on to him and look at the furthest edges of the tree. There she saw that cobwebs were hanging all round it from the outermost leaf to the next, and so on, till the whole of the top boughs seemed caught in a great veil. And this veil of web was black with huge numbers of flies and gnats that had flown in and been caught in the sticky network. A great bluebottle was struggling in the meshes not a foot from her head, and as she looked, a spider ran down from a leaf above and threw another cord which twisted round his leg and entangled him more hopelessly. Then it ran round and round him till he was tied up so tightly in the cord that he could no longer move, and so gave up the contest and was taken away. "To our larders," said Mr. Spider.

"You see by this method we not only provide food for all our workpeople (five hundred of them there are, to feed three times a day) but we prevent insects from getting into our work and blundering into our delicate

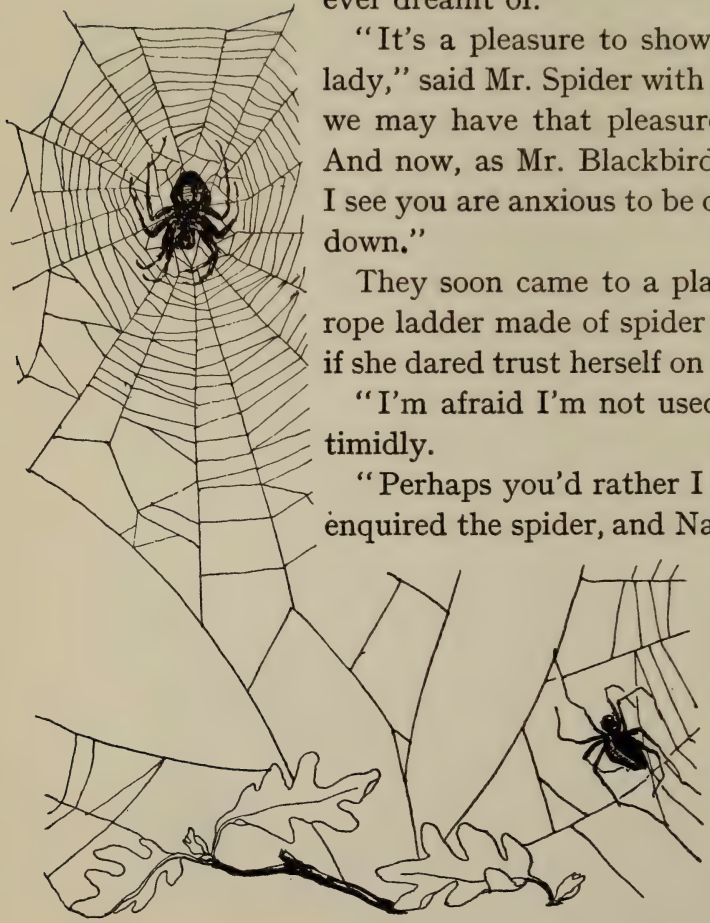




fabrics, which they would ruin altogether if they had a chance to come near, the clumsy creatures!" Mr. Spider spoke with the utmost contempt, and he appeared to ignore the fact that he was an insect himself.

"Fancy," he went on, "a large gnat or horsefly running up against one of our pieces of lace and spoiling something it has taken us months to make perfect!"

"It is wonderfully arranged," said Nancy, "the whole place is more marvellous than anything I have ever dreamt of."



"It's a pleasure to show it to you, my dear young lady," said Mr. Spider with great satisfaction. "I hope we may have that pleasure again in the near future. And now, as Mr. Blackbird has not yet returned, and I see you are anxious to be off, let me show you the way down."

They soon came to a place from which hung a long rope ladder made of spider rope. Nancy didn't feel as if she dared trust herself on it so high above the ground.

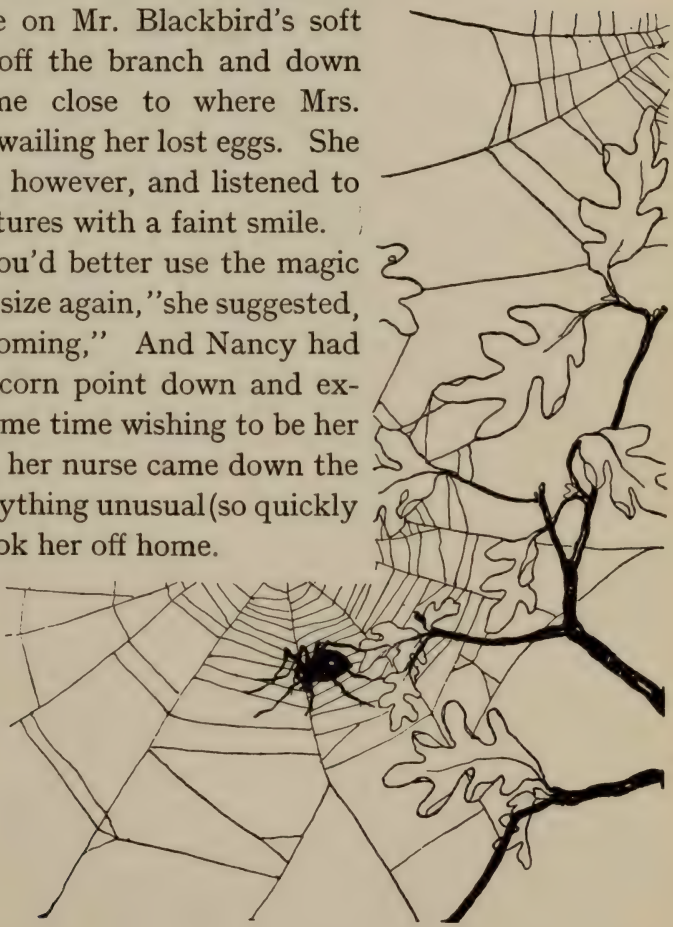
"I'm afraid I'm not used to rope ladders," she said timidly.

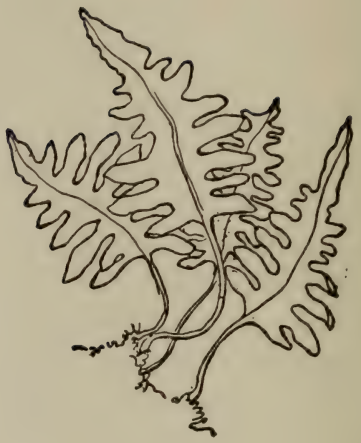
"Perhaps you'd rather I let you down on a swing?" enquired the spider, and Nancy was just going to reply,

when there was a whirr of wings, and Mr. Blackbird alighted on the bough beside them.

"Ready to come down?" he asked, and on being answered, "climb on my back then," said he, and in another minute Nancy had bade farewell to the spider, and found herself once more on Mr. Blackbird's soft cushiony back. He sprang off the branch and down they flew, landing this time close to where Mrs. Blackbird was sitting, still bewailing her lost eggs. She looked a little more cheerful, however, and listened to an account of Nancy's adventures with a faint smile.

"Now, my dear, I think you'd better use the magic acorn, and become your usual size again," she suggested, "I think I hear your nurse coming," And Nancy had only just time to hold the acorn point down and exclaim 'Hey Presto!' at the same time wishing to be her usual size, when sure enough, her nurse came down the path, and, without noticing anything unusual (so quickly did the acorn do its work), took her off home.





## CHAPTER III

# LADYBIRD

OME time passed before Nancy was able to stay and play alone in the wood once more. She comforted herself by taking out her treasures from time to time, and gazing, from the white feather to the acorn, and back again.

At last, however, came a morning when she was allowed to remain behind in the clearing as before, and soon she had found her friends, the blackbirds, busily engaged in constructing an entirely new nest in another bush not far from the first.

"Look!" exclaimed Mrs. Blackbird, after she had greeted her. "We have put it right up near the top of the bush where it will be much safer; and isn't it splendidly hidden?" She seemed in very good spirits again, and could think of nothing but the new nest. Mr. Blackbird was putting the finishing touches. He

drew back and contemplated his work with his head on one side.

"It really does look rather well," he said; "neat, I call it, without being ostentatious. What a pity you are not able to fly up and see it properly," he observed to Nancy; but she, producing the acorn, wished herself tall enough to look into the nest, and immediately so she was; as tall as the bush itself. She could now see the nest beautifully, and was admiring it, when she noticed that both birds looked very uneasy; and Mrs. Blackbird said:

"You must really excuse us, but you are rather an alarming size, if you don't mind my saying so. Do, do be smaller, for I am so frightened. I expect I shall desert my nice new nest if you aren't quick."

Mr. Blackbird was also fidgetting in a very nervous manner, and Nancy hastily made herself her right size again; then thinking she was really still too large for a bird's companion, she wished to be one inch tall, and became the tiny girl she had been when she visited the Dryad and the spider. The birds were quite happy at once, and after talking a little longer to her, Mrs. Blackbird said she must go off and look for some food,

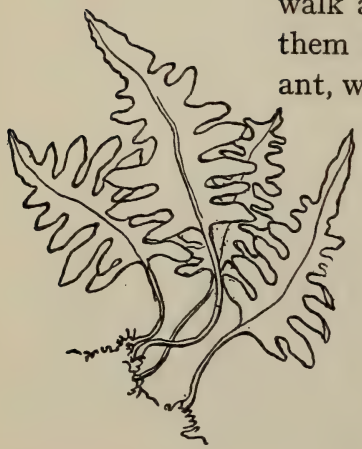
as she had been so busy all day that she had forgotten to have any breakfast. Mr. Blackbird also flew away, but perched on a high bough not far off and began to whistle cheerfully. Nancy strolled about through the long grass and ferns which now towered above her head and seemed nearly as high as the real trees.

Suddenly she came upon a little house not more than four inches high, standing in the midst of a lovely little lawn, surrounded with flower beds where daisies, veronicas, violets, and other small spring flowers grew in wild profusion as high, some of them, as Nancy's head. The house itself was covered with creepers, convolvulous and mother of millions ; so that if she had been her usual size she might have passed it without noticing it, or have squashed a whole flower border flat under her foot and never have known the destruction she was dealing. The house was painted pink, with green shutters and balconies, and all the windows were wide open, but no one was in sight. Nancy walked all round the building, and on one of the balconies she thought she saw what might be a cradle, while under a window lay a rattle and a little wooly ball.

"So there must be children living here," she thought to herself. She went back into the garden, and out at the little gate

As she shut it carefully behind her, she took one more look at the dear little house, wishing she could live in one like it, when suddenly she noticed a puff of smoke rising from the roof at a place quite a long way from any chimney. She looked again, and in a minute there was another puff.

"Surely the house can't be on fire," she thought. "I must find someone and tell them. But there seems no one about!" She ran back into the garden, and in at the open door, and up the stairs. There was smoke coming from under a door on the top floor. She rushed into all the rooms calling as loud as she could, but no one was there. One door on the second floor was locked, and she shouted and knocked, but no answer came back. She ran into the kitchen, and round to the back of the house, and out again among the flower beds. What should she do? Perhaps the people had gone for a walk a little way outside the gate and she would find them there. She turned to go, and nearly ran into an ant, who was busy with a broom on the path. He was



evidently a gardener, as he had a basket and a small wheelbarrow beside him, and he was sweeping the path with so much energy but such a sleepy expression, that Nancy suspected he had been asleep, and only wakened at the sound of her approaching footsteps.

"Didn't you hear me calling?" she said breathlessly. "Do come quick. The house is on fire!"

The gardener dropped his broom and stared at her.

"Her Ladyship is out," was all he said, after a moment's silence.

"But I tell you the house is on fire! It must be put out," repeated Nancy impatiently. "Can't you call someone who will know what to do? Who does this place belong to?"

"This is Lady Bird's house, this is," replied the ant still staring, "she's out. Out in the wood I guess. If I may ask respectful, Miss, what makes you come tearing about like this here, a-going on about the 'ouse being afire? Happen you've been having a dream like, on the lawn yonder. 'Tis sleepy weather, so it is," and he rubbed his eyes, and yawned cautiously behind his hand; he seemed still only half awake.

"Oh you stupid creature!" cried Nancy, stamping

her foot. "The house is on fire, I tell you, and it will burn to the ground if you stand there doing nothing. There's no one indoors ; I looked everywhere except in one room," she added, "the door at the top of the stairs was locked, but I shouted and no one answered."

"The door at the top of the stairs was locked ?" repeated the gardener, with signs of awakening interest, "that's the nursery door. You don't never mean to tell me that nurse girl has gone out, and locked in the babies ! They would be asleep now, of course," he went on, laying down his broom and moving towards the house, "and I spec's she's run out to have a talk with her young man, the beetle, who lives away down by the pond in the field. She ought to be ashamed of herself, that she ought !" And he started to run. As they came to the house, he paused and called out to Nancy :

" You go down the path, my dear, and see if you can find her Ladyship;" and then disappeared into the hall.

Nancy turned and hurried off as she was told, through the gate and down a tiny path that led on from it through the grass under the bushes. She ran on, looking anxiously to right and left, but saw no one for some

time. At last she passed a small snail and stopped to ask it if it had seen Lady Bird.

"The house is on fire, you know," she told it, "the children will burn unless something is done."

"She went past a little while ago," said the snail slowly, with a pause between each word. "That house is always catching fire." Something must be wrong with the flues, I say. It's the disadvantage of that sort of house ; you leave it for an hour, and when you return, where is it ? Where is it ? That's what I say." she repeated triumphantly. "Now take a house like mine. It goes where I go, and when I come home I don't find a heap of ashes where my front door should be."

Nancy didn't stay to hear any more as the snail would evidently have talked for ever. She bowed hastily and ran on, calling as she went. "Lady Bird, Lady Bird !"

Suddenly as she passed a wild rose bush, she caught a glimpse of a speck of red high up above her, and there was Lady Bird looking anxiously down at her.

"Did I hear my name mentioned ?" she asked suspiciously.

"Oh, Lady Bird ! I have been looking for you

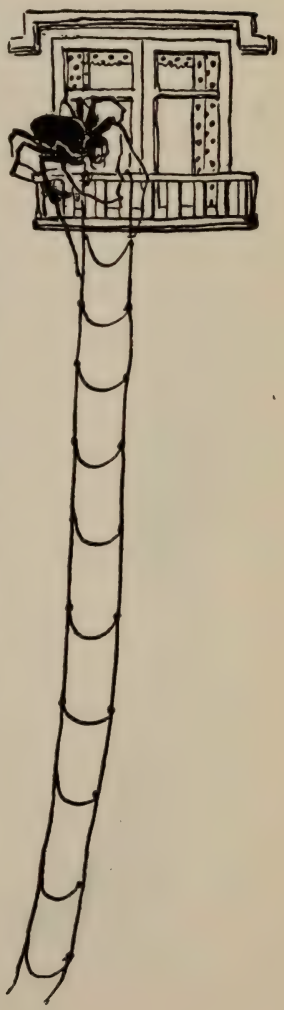
everywhere," cried the child panting. "Fly away home, your house is on fire, and your children will burn!"

"On fire again!" muttered the ladybird, "this is getting beyond a joke! Why! It was on fire only three weeks ago, and five weeks before that, and three times last summer. What I have to pay the firemen, no one would believe."

"The children are asleep in the nursery, and the door is locked," said Nancy. "They will be burnt if you don't get them out quick."

"What," cried the ladybird, "locked in the nursery! Oh! my babies! my precious children!" And she spread her wings and was off in a moment, and out of sight before Nancy had time to turn round. She followed more slowly for she was breathless after her long run. By the time she got back to the little house, great clouds of smoke were rising from it, and a large crowd had gathered and was doing it's best to put out the fire. Several spiders were engaged in making a rope ladder, and fixing it to the nursery window. A row of beetles were passing acorn cupfuls of dew from one to another, and to some earwigs who ran up and down the walls to the roof with them, where they poured the

contents on the place where the smoke was thickest. As Nancy came there was a noise of wheels and shouting, and a smart little fire engine, drawn by two field mice and manned by grasshoppers, drove up at a canter, and at once set to work to fix up their hose and pump water from the well on to the flames, which were now beginning to appear under the eaves and through some of the windows. Nancy saw that the hose was made of quantities of little pieces of the hollow stalks of dry grass neatly joined together. By this time the spiders had their ladder ready, and, running up to the nursery window, fastened it securely to the sill. At once two large blackbeetles began to climb it. How slowly they moved ! thought Nancy, as they deliberately tested the strength of each rung before trusting their weight on it.



"Why doesn't someone else go ? They will never be in time !" she exclaimed aloud.

"They always do the rescue work at fires," said a small voice beside her, and looking down, she saw a green fly standing near. "You see," he went on, "most of us are quite unfit to do it. If the spiders go near the flames, their hairy coats catch in a moment, and it's the same with any winged creatures. I, for instance,

should just frizzle up in the heat! And Lady Bird's own wings would fail her immediatly if she tried to go near the flames. But those big blackbeetles' coats are like a sort of armour against the fire; and they are strong enough to lift heavy weights besides, if necessary, as it often is. They really relish a little heat, and some of them actually go and live in human houses, where they can get behind the skirting boards, by kitchen fires, and warm themselves thoroughly."

While he was speaking the beetles had gone on climbing, and now first one and then another of them disappeared into the room.

A minute or two of breathless excitement followed, and then one of them reappeared, carrying in his arms a tiny child's cradle.

"I must have another rope," he called down; and one of the spiders, at great danger to himself, for sparks were now flying in all directions, ran nimbly up the ladder and handed him the end of a rope he had just finished, and then ran down again. The beetle tied the rope round the cradle, and carefully let it down to the crowd below, who received it safely and bore it away triumphantly to poor Lady Bird, who was being sup-

VOLUMES OF SMOKE SHOT OUT

ported in a half fainting condition by two or three ants, under a plantain on the lawn. At the same time the other beetle came to the window with first one and then another cradle, both of which were successfully lowered and carried out of danger. The little Ladybirds continued to sleep peacefully, half suffocated by the smoke though they were ; but they were soon awakened by the rejoicings of their distracted mother, and all three set up a dismal howl, that swelled the cheering with which the two beetles were greeted as they descended the ladder.

No sooner had they reached the ground, than with a fearful crash, the roof fell in, and volumes of smoke, through which the flames ever rose higher and higher, shot out through the top of the house.

The grasshoppers redoubled their efforts, the water streamed from the hose in a long, fountain-like column, till presently the flames died down, then totally disappeared ; and at last nothing seemed to be left of the fire but the clouds of steam and smoke which still poured from the hole where the roof had been, and rolled heavily out of every window.

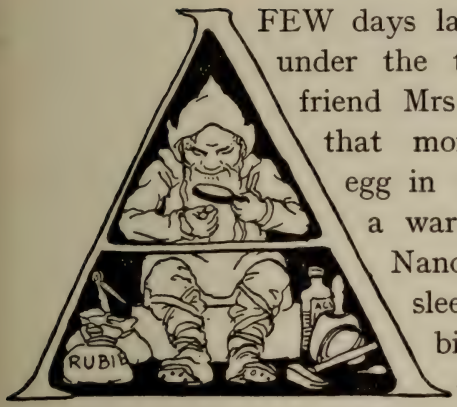
The crowd dispersed slowly : Lady Bird and the

children had already been taken off by some kind friends, and soon no one was left in the little garden, now all trampled and blackened, but Nancy and the firemen. These last continued to let the hose play on the wrecked house, and Nancy suddenly became conscious that the morning had sped away, and that she was probably being looked for in the clearing. She went quickly towards it, and as soon as she was out of sight of the ruins, turned her acorn point down, and wished to be her usual size again, and at once—so she was.

As she emerged into the glade on one side her nurse came down it from the other, so she was just in time to escape a scolding for not having stayed where she was left, and was not obliged to enter into explanations which she could'nt help feeling would not be understood.

## CHAPTER IV

# THE GNOMES



A FEW days later Nancy was sitting under the thorn bush with her friend Mrs. Blackbird, who had that morning laid her third egg in the new nest. It was a warm, lazy morning, and Nancy was feeling a little sleepy, and Mrs. Blackbird was buried in her own thoughts. A deep silence reigned throughout the wood, and the little girl listened idly to the only sound that was to be heard in the stillness. It was a kind of dull thud, a muffled knocking, and was repeated at regular intervals with occasional pauses.

After a few minutes Nancy sat up suddenly.

"Do you hear it?" she asked her friend, "that sort of tapping that is going on all the time? What can it be?"

"That's the Gnomes at work with their pickaxes," replied Mrs. Blackbird; "do you want to go and visit them? The way is down by the root of the silver fir." She pointed through the wood, and, the voice of Mr. Blackbird being heard at that moment from the tree tops, she added a hasty word of caution to Nancy not to fall into rabbit burrows on the way to the underworld, and flew off.

Nancy got up too and ran into the wood, looking on every side for a silver fir. "I can't miss it," she said to herself, "I expect I shall see the shine of it a long way off!"

However, no such tree could she find, and at last she was obliged to ask a mouse, who was passing, if it could tell her the way.

The mouse replied very civily that not only could it tell her the way, but that it would show her the door.

"It's not very easy to find if you've not been there before," it remarked; and led the way to the foot of a very large old silver fir, which grew quite close by, but which Nancy had never looked at, as she expected to find a solid silver tree, and the real one was as green as you please, with perhaps a tinge of silver grey about it.

"I can't think why this is called silver," she said to the mouse, who only shook its head and looked wise, as it disappeared under a big root that twisted right out of the ground on the bank beneath the tree. Nancy was obliged to bring herself down to an inch in height, by the help of her magic acorn, before she could follow. Under the root she found some green swing doors covered with bark, which she never would have noticed if the mouse had not just passed and left them swinging.

Inside was the top step of a corkscrew stair, and Nancy could see the mouse's tail vanishing down it. Down she went after it, till they stopped by a very small door at the side of the stairs.

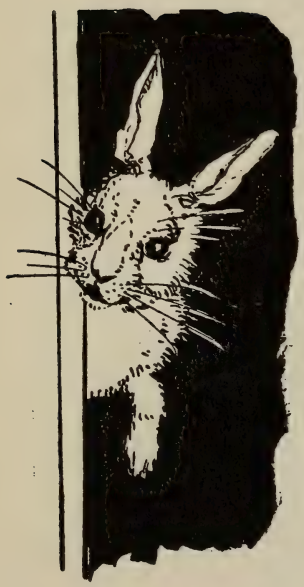
"This is my house," said the mouse, holding out her hand to say good-bye; "perhaps some day you will pay me a visit when you have nothing better to do? I should be delighted to see you. You can find the rest of the way down by yourself, can't you? You pass some of the rabbits' doors, but you must just go straight on till you get to the bottom. Good-bye." And it whisked in at the door, and shut it with a click before Nancy had time to answer.

"It is a very kind mouse," thought she, as she went

on down the stairs, "but I wish it hadn't been in quite such a hurry. There are a lot of things I ought to have asked it; what to say to the Gnomes for one thing. I am afraid they don't like strangers, or else why do they hide so far under the ground?" As she went further down she noticed several doors at the side of the staircase.

Most of them had brass labels, with, on one, Mr. Jack Rabbit, and on another, Mr. and Mrs. Bunny, and a third one with Mr. Peter Rabbit inscribed on it.

Suddenly, as she was trying to read another label in the dim light which faintly illuminated the stair, the door burst open. and a rabbits head was popped out, nearly knocking her down.



"I beg your pardon, my dear," it said hurriedly, "but if you see the Gnomes, do for mercy's sake ask them to be careful where they're coming to! Another ten minutes, and it's my belief they'll have the dining room floor on their heads! They ought to be more careful not to mine under peoples' foundations, in my opinion; a pretty job it will be if the whole flat falls through into Gnomeland! Who's to put it up again, that's what I want to know! You just ask them that,

my little dear! I can hear their picks under the floor as near as makes no difference, and all the china and glass dancing on the dresser at every stroke! If it wasn't that the weasel, nasty beast! has been heard slinking about the neighbourhood this morning, I should pretty soon run down myself, so I would, and let them know what I think of such goings on! If it isn't stopped, I shall go to the Queen herself, next new moon. Tell them I said that. Now run on quickly, my little dear, or you won't be in time to save the dining room floor." So saying, she shut the door hastily in Nancy's face, not pausing to listen a moment to a reply.

"Well, they are funny people down here," thought the child, and hurried on down the stair. By this time she seemed to be far down in the earth, and the thud of the picks sounded louder, and near at hand.

Down she went, down and down, and round and round, till suddenly she came to the foot of the stairs, and out into a vast hall or cave, from which countless passages and galleries led away in every direction. It was dimly lighted by large lamps which hung from the roof, and by quantities of little lanterns which were moving about on all sides, an inch or so from the ground.

As she stared about her in bewilderment, she saw one of these little lanterns approaching, and as it came close, she discovered that it was attached to the cap of of a little man, who was almost invisible behind its glare. He had a brown, wrinkled face, with a long, white beard, and was dressed in a tight suit of some dark red stuff. Nancy went to meet him, and held out her hand.

"How do you do?" said she, "I hope you won't mind my coming to pay you a visit. I am a mortal child," she added, seeing he looked puzzled.

"I am glad to see you, mortal child," replied the Gnome in a deep voice. "Welcome to Gnomeland. We are very busy at present preparing for the ball the Queen is giving next full moon; the Elf King is coming, and all the fairies want new jewellery for the event, so we are hard at it day and night, as you will see. On that account you will excuse my not accompanying you round the galleries? You will find plenty of Gnomes everywhere to give you any help of information you may wish for, and I am sure you will understand that it is only the extreme pressure of work that prevents us from having the pleasure of entertaining you more fittingly."

He said all this so grandly that Nancy felt rather shy, and could only murmur a few words in reply, such as, "Not at all! Certainly. Of course!" Then she remembered Mrs. Rabbit's sad case, and running after the Gnome, who had moved off, she told him of her interview on the stairs, and repeated Mrs. Rabbit's words as far as she could recollect them.

"Dear me! dear me!" cried the Gnome. "The times I've told them not to mine too high! It's those tiresome hobgoblins. They will not listen to their instructions. I must see to it at once!" And with a hasty bow, he hurried away.

Nancy went slowly down the hall, looking at everything as she passed.

She soon saw that all the little moving lights were from lanterns worn by the gnome miners who were walking about with their pickaxes over their shoulders in and out of the side galleries.

Most of them were dressed in red or brown, and a few in mole coloured grey; and all were very old, apparently, with long, flowing white hair and beards. Nancy wandered up a passage after one of them, until he stopped at a jutting out piece of rock and began to strike

great blows at it with his pick, so that fragments fell all round him from the rock. After a few minutes he paused, and bending over one of the fallen pieces, took from it something which he held up in front of his lantern, and told Nancy to look at it.

"A very fine ruby," he said with satisfaction, as she gazed at the shining red stone. He let her look at it and hold it in her hand for a minute, and then put it into a leather bag he wore over his shoulder, and went on working.

From time to time a precious stone fell to the ground among the splinters of rock, till his bag was nearly full. The last was a very big sapphire which shone blue and deep as a summer night, and was so large it would hardly go into the bag.

They hurried back to the cavern, and passing to the further end, came into another of equal size, which was filled with long benches, at which sat quantities of little men all hard at work with hammers, files, forceps and brazing lamps. Heaps of gold and silver wire lay about, and piles of various metals beaten into sheets of different thicknesses.

There were scissors and drills and blow-pipes ; pliers

and fretsaws ; all tidily set out in rows at the back of the work benches, within easy reach of each workman, who sat opposite a semi-circular hole cut in the table, with a large leather bag attached to the edge of the hole, and hanging down between his knees, to catch the gold dust, or anything he might drop while he worked. In front of each one lay a little box containing different precious stones, and these they were engaged in setting in all kinds of ornaments and pretty objects.

Nancy stopped to look at one who was making a most beautiful crown of diamonds, which glittered and shone in the lamplight.

He was fixing them into the palest, pinkest, seashells, which were set upright all round the crown, and the diamonds shivered and sparkled as if the shells were still dripping with drops of sea water.

"What a lovely thing that is you are making," said the child to the Gnome.

He was so intent on his work that he hadn't noticed her, and when she spoke, he jumped so, that he dropped the diamond.

"Who are you ? Coming round and startling people so ?" he said, crossly. "Some folks seem to have

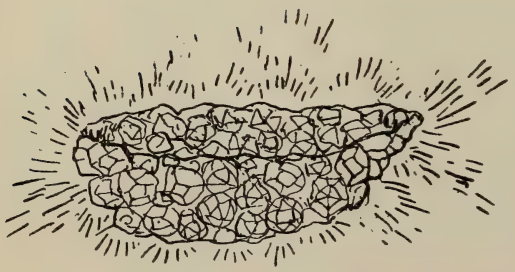
nothing better to do than to get in other folks' way!"

He groped in the bag, where luckily the diamond had been caught, and Nancy, after hastily begging his pardon, moved away sadly. She hardly dared look at the other Gnomes, but couldn't help hovering near one, who was fitting flat blue stones together so neatly that the joins were scarcely visible. He smiled at her kindly, so she thought she might speak without annoying him.

"What is that for?" she asked, pointing to the work in his hands. "I do so want to know, if you wouldn't mind telling me."

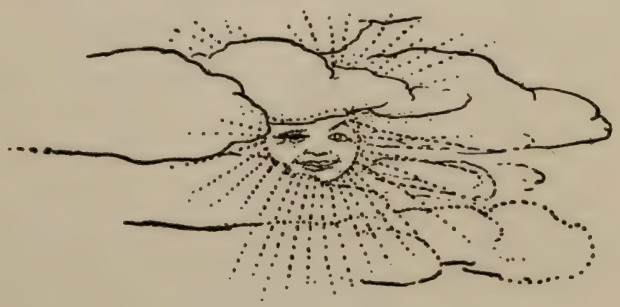
"This is going to be a bath for Her Majesty," replied the gnome. "I am joining all these flat sapphires together to make a basin, in which the water will look as blue as they are; the Queen likes her bath water to be blue all the year round; and if there's one thing she likes even better, it's to have the sunshine dancing on the top of it. You see that diamond cage my friend over there is making?"

Nancy's eyes followed his outstretched finger, and saw a Gnome a little way off, busily making what appeared to be a sort of boat entirely of closely joined



diamonds. It didn't look much like a cage, and she ventured to say so.

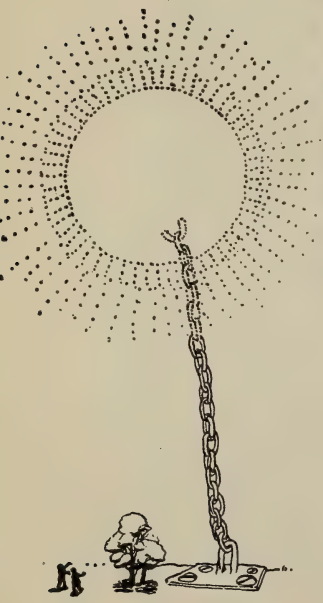
"It isn't *exactly* a cage," agreed the workman, reluctantly, "it's a suntrap. But when the sun is once caught, we shall keep him in it, and then it will be a cage!" he added hopefully. "The Queen is very anxious to catch him, because he would be more useful if he was tied up, and couldn't shirk his work every few days and nearly all the winter, the way he does now. Why! when he's in a lazy mood, he just hides behind a cloud and gets off shining for the rest of the day sometimes, and in the cold weather, when it's most important he should give out all the heat he possibly can, what does he do? I simply ask you, what *does* he do? Next to nothing. That's about it! I've known him go to bed at night in weather so cold and frosty, that it made even him get redder in the face than usual, and do you suppose he got up again next morning when the cocks called him? Not a bit of it! As often as not he simply tucks in the cloud blankets more tightly, and rolls round and goes to sleep again, and perhaps never gets up at all for the next week; and then very likely only sticks his nose out between the clouds, and draws it



back again for days longer ; although he sees the snow and ice settling down colder and colder on the earth, and knows perfectly well that if he only did his work properly, everyone would be quite comfortable, instead of being frozen to death by Jack Frost, or cut in two by the north wind. No ! He's a nasty, lazy, undependable fellow, is the sun, and when we catch him, we'll just show him ! That's all !"

"It will be very nice to make him come out when he's wanted !" said Nancy ; "I suppose when you want a fine day, all you'll have to do will be to open the cage door and say, "Here, come out !" But how will you get him back again, do you think ?"

"We shall keep him on a chain," replied the Gnome ; "it would never do to let him get roaming about loose wherever he liked. Of course, you know, they keep him pretty tightly chained up, up in the sky, or we'd have had him long ago. They let him come and dance on the water sometimes, and that's where we shall catch him in the end. It makes it very difficult too, in a way," he went on rather gloomily, "we keep making trap after trap. Been at it for years, some of us. No expense spared, and always the very best diamonds used.



But the job is to get them to float ; you push them off from the bank in the morning, or at least the elves do that, because we underground people don't care to be on the earth top by daylight. It's not for ourselves we try to catch the sun,you understand. Well, you launch the traps, and push them off, and then instead of floating along as they are intended to,somehow or other they always seem to sink. It's most discouraging. We can't make it out at all. This new one—he's making it all in water-tight compartments—you'd think it must be all right ; but it's my belief it will go straight to the bottom like all the others. Some say the Naiads take them, though they deny it—I don't know. Anyway it's very sad ; very sad indeed." He talked more and more and more gloomily, and Nancy would not have been surprised to see him burst into tears.

"It certainly does seem unlucky," she said sympathetically; and tried to cheer him up. "Perhaps this new one will succeed better ; it looks as if it would catch the sun if anything can. Now, that beautiful bath you're making," she went on, hoping to change the subject, "you don't want that to float, do you ? The water's got to float in it instead, hasn't it, and the

Fairy Queen will float on top of it. How I should like to have a bath like that ! It looks like the sea already !"

"Her Majesty is very fond of a clear, dark blue," replied the Gnome, with a more cheerful air ; "I matched the sapphires to the forest pools on fine moonlight nights. I am glad you like the look of it."

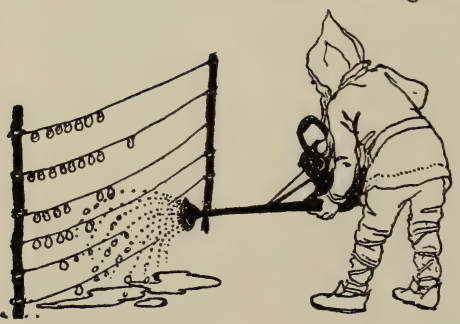
"I think it's quite perfect," said Nancy.

She stayed a little while longer, watching him work, and then moved on, slowly, pausing at times when she noticed a particularly amiable-looking Gnome.

Most of them were making jewellery ; rings and bracelets, necklaces and coronets, lockets and brooches, of emeralds, rubies, turquoises, sapphires and diamonds, and all kinds of other precious stones ; besides amber and jade, and all sorts of beautiful shells, and even horn.

At the end of the cavern was a great stack of baskets, all full of dewdrops, and several Gnomes near by, were hard at work making more. There were quantities of strands of wire stretched from side to side of the cave, one over the other ; and one of the Gnomes watered them with a watering can till the water hung in drops from all the wires.

Another gnome lifted these carefully off with a sort



of spoon, and laid them in rows on a silver dish, which he then placed near an oven to dry. When dry, the dewdrops were packed in baskets, and stacked with the others.

"The elves come and fetch them," explained one of the little men to Nancy, "and lay them on the flowers and grass at night, as decorations for the fairy ballrooms. You can see them still there in the mornings if you go out early, but they soon melt, especially in damp weather, and become waterdrops again ; one must be very careful to keep them perfectly dry. In summer the elves often pick them up again before morning, many of them as good as new, and use them a second time for the following night ; then of course you don't see them lying about in the day."

After looking at the dewdrop makers for some time, Nancy wandered on up a side passage, from which she heard, as she penetrated deeper into it, a sound of distant laughter and shouting.

As she went further, this got louder and louder, and at last she came upon a crowd of little people all gathered together, and all laughing and talking at the tops of their voices. She saw that they were not like Gnomes, though they looked nearly as old and had

wrinkled, puckered little faces; but they had no beards, and wore clothes of every colour, and on their shoulders grew pointed wings, like bats' wings.

They all had very mischievous, sly expressions, and most of them were never still for a moment, but were always jumping and gambolling about.

When they saw Nancy, they all ran and clustered round her crying,:

"A mortal! A mortal!" and at once began to ask her a thousand questions.

How did she come here? Where did she live? What was her name?—Her age?—Her father's name? —"How do you like the underworld?" said one, and before she could answer, "aren't you afraid to come and see us? we're very powerful people, and could turn you into a frog as soon as look at you."

"Or a bat!" cried another.

"Or a cat!" shouted a third.

"Or a rat!" screamed a fourth, with a yell of mirth, and then they all began shouting at once till Nancy was nearly deafened and a little frightened.

"I do hope you won't turn me into a rat," she pleaded when she could make herself heard, "I don't so much

mind your making me into a cat, but still, if you do, perhaps I shall scratch you."

They only laughed louder than ever at this, and then became suddenly quiet, and began whispering together, and glancing at Nancy out of the corners of their eyes in a way that alarmed her more than all the shouting had done, for she felt they were really plotting to mischief her.

However, a cry from one of them, who had been poking about by himself in a corner, distracted their attention from her.

"Gold!" he was shouting. "I found it. I shall get the prize!" The Gnome said he would give it to the one who found gold first!" He held up a piece of rock that shone yellow in the lamplight, and all the rest rushed to pick up their spades and pickaxes which were lying in a heap near by, and began to dig frantically all around. They soon disclosed a large post which appeared to be supporting the ground above their heads.

"Hurrah!" cried one. "This is part of the foundations of the rabbit flat upstairs. We'll pull it down! And how surprised the rabbits will be. What fun!" And they rained blows on the beam.

At that moment, to Nancy's delight, she caught sight of the old Gnome she had first spoken to, coming along the passage.

"Oh, you hobgoblins," he exclaimed. "I have been hunting for you everywhere ! All over the underworld. This is not where I told you to work to-day."

"Oh, we just thought we'd come here ! And we've found gold," cried the hobgoblins, "and now we are going to pull down the beam, and all the rabbit flats will fall in ! Such larks ! You wait and see !"

"Stop at once!" cried the Gnome, in such a terrible voice that all the little men paused. "No doubt you think it would be fine fun to see all the poor rabbits' homes in ruins, but what do you suppose they would feel about it ? Not so much fun for them, eh ? How would you like someone to come and tumble the underworld to bits ? You know very well what distress it causes when mortals come digging for coal and suchlike rubbish ! Do you want the rabbits to compare you to mortals ?"

The hobgoblins looked abashed. One by one they threw down their tools and stood around in a crestfallen manner.

"And how about the young rabbits?" the Gnome continued sternly. "When you have killed all the old ones with your pranks, what's to happen to the little ones? I suppose you consider it amusing to think of hundreds of baby bunnies starving among the ruins, if they escape being killed outright!"

At this tragic picture one of the little people burst into floods of tears, and the rest, after a moment or two of shamefaced looks, gave way to their remorseful feelings in the same fashion, and throwing themselves on the ground in a circle round the Gnome and Nancy, howled and sobbed without restraint for two or three minutes.

"We didn't think. We didn't mean," they cried despairingly.

"There, there," said the Gnome at the end of this time, "that's enough! I see you are sorry and won't do it again. Get back to work, and try and think more of other peoples' feelings in the future!"

So saying, he and Nancy left the group to dry its eyes, and returned down the passage they had come by.

"We have a lot of trouble with the hobgoblins," he remarked to the little girl as they went. "They are not

bad little creatures at heart, but terribly mischievous and thoughtless. They always think it will be great fun to destroy something, or to frighten someone, and many a time I have caught them, prowling under bushes and miauling like cats to terrify the birds, or hiding in the rushes beside a pool, to worry the slugs and tadpoles by imitating a duck quacking. They are allowed to go and play in the woods and on the moors at night, as we really can't be looking after them the whole time, but the fairies complain of them a good deal. Still, they mean well, and are always very sorry when they see what harm they have done."

As he stopped speaking, a laugh rang out in the distance, and he added :

"You see they soon forget. They will all be frolicking about as usual in no time."

With this he took leave of Nancy, who went on by herself down another gallery which led, he told her, to the outside underworld.

And soon she came out into a dark, narrow path over-hung by rocks, and over-shadowed by the trunks of old twisted trees with gnarled and knotted roots, sticking out from the banks, and making, with the

HOLDING A LONG FISHING-ROD OVER THE DARK POOL

stems and branches, such a dense, matted, tangled roof, that she could see no sky at all, and the path was almost quite dark. She could just grope her way along it, and began to be rather frightened at not being able to make out more of her surroundings, especially when a hob-goblin suddenly sprang from the bank and flapped his wings in her face like a bat, and then burst into shrieks of laughter at her alarm.

She ran on, stumbling in the darkness, and finally emerged in an open space where it was a little lighter.

She found she had come to the edge of a pool which lay very still and black below her. On all sides gigantic rocks rose to a great height and ringed the pool round, till it seemed to Nancy like the bottom of a cup. Far away at the top she could see a patch of sky, deep blue as a sapphire, with a few stars shining very large and bright.

On the bank where she was standing, sat a Gnome, huddled up among the stones, and holding a long fishing rod motionless over the pool. From time to time he lifted the rod till the hook swung clear of the water, looked anxiously to see if the bait was all right, and flung it in again. Presently Nancy saw other dim

shapes sitting at intervals along the banks, and at last was able to make out the figures of Gnome fishermen stationed all round the pool at a little distance from each other. Some of them had baskets slung on their backs, but though she watched for what seemed a long time, she did not see one of them catch anything. At last the Gnome nearest her drew in his line, and after looking critically at the bait and shaking his head at it, began to tie on a fly, something like a big white moth as far as Nancy could see.

"Not a very good day for fishing," she ventured to remark.

"It's very much like any other day," replied the Gnome, without looking up.

"I was afraid you weren't catching anything," said the child; "did you catch much before I came?"

"Nothing," was the answer. "I have never caught anything." "But," he went on, turning round and lowering his voice to an excited whisper, "I don't mind telling *you*, because I'm sure you won't let it go any further—the week before last, I'm not sure I didn't have a bite! Not sure mind you. It may have been one."

"Dear me!" said Nancy, "you don't say so!" for she saw he expected her to show surprise. "What do you think it was?"

"A star," he replied; "that's what we fish for, you know; no one has ever caught one yet, though."

"It seems very persevering to go on so long if no one has ever caught one," Nancy remarked; "do you think there are any there to catch?"

"Of course there are," said the little old man, scornfully. "Can't you see them in the water? Where are your eyes?"

There were several stars, certainly, twinkling away on the surface of the pool.

"But I thought those were reflections of the ones in the sky," said the child.

"I don't know what you mean by that," answered the fisherman. "You've never seen falling stars, I suppose?"

"No. Never," said she. "Do they often fall?"

"Ever so often," said the Gnome. "Almost every night; and of course they fall into the water."

Nancy didn't quite understand this.

"Why of course?" she enquired.

"Because there they are," replied the Gnome. "Did you ever see a star that had fallen on to the ground? No, I thought not. But one can see them quite plainly on the water when it's fine. They must fall to somewhere; and the water is where they fall to. That's as plain as the nose on your face!"

"Why do you want to catch them?" asked Nancy.

"I don't do it for pleasure entirely," said the Gnome. "We have to fish for them because the Queen has set her heart on having one in her crown. I'm fond of the sport myself, but I must say I should rather like to angle for something that took the bait more readily. There's nothing else in the pool, though," he went on regretfully, "not even a compliment; I've heard of people fishing for them sometimes, and I believe they occasionally get one."

"I don't fancy they catch them in water, though," said Nancy, thoughfully, "not as a rule, you know."

"You can't fish without water," said the Gnome decidedly, flinging in his line so that the hook fell plump on top of a shining star, and dispersed it for a few moments.

"You see, it's frightened and gone off," he whispered,

"but I daresay it will come back in a minute, and have a look at the fly. Ah! There it is!" he exclaimed, as the surface of the water resumed its former tranquility; "it's looking at the moth, but I'm afraid it doesn't mean to take it. We have tried every sort of bait, and sometimes we drag the pool with nets, but it is so deep, they always manage to escape."

He heaved a great sigh, and relapsed into silence.

Nancy waited a little while longer, but as nothing happened and the Gnomes all continued to sit motionless round the rocks as if they themselves had turned to stone, she began to wonder if she were not staying too long in the underworld for a first visit. So she said good-bye to the fisherman, and retraced her steps along the dark path, where luckily she met no more hobgoblins or other adventures, and hurried back through the caverns and up the curling stairs, till she came out through the swinging doors at the top and into the light of day once more. She quickly pointed the magic acorn to the ground, and—Hey Presto!—resumed her usual size, and reached the clearing just at the right time, a few seconds before her nurse appeared to take her home.

## CHAPTER V

# BIRDLAND

THE next day Nancy bethought her of the mouse's invitation to visit her house on the way to the underworld, and ran off to the silver fir tree as soon as she was left alone.

No sooner, however, had she assumed her one inch height (which was now beginning to feel as natural as the other every day height) and pushed her way through the swing doors, than she found the way blocked by a large stone, and a piece of board, on which were roughly painted the words, " Closed for Repairs."

"Repairs of what?" she wondered, and with a sinking heart, "can those hobgoblins have pulled down the rabbit flats after all?"

It seemed only too likely, and the tears gathered in her eyes as she conjured up the pictures of wrecked

homes and dead and dying bunnies, which the thought suggested.

She was sadly turning to go when her eye caught the glint of a little knob in the opposite wall. She looked again and found it was the handle of a door, concealed, as all the woodland doors are, so cleverly, that it was only by an accident that she had discovered it. She turned the knob and the door flew open, disclosing another flight of steps, this time winding upward instead of down.

Again she passed by several little doors, all labelled like the ones below with the names of the occupiers of the houses they gave access to.

There was "The Dryad of the Silver Fir" on the first; "Mrs. Owl" on the second; and Mr. and Mrs. Squirrel" on another; but though Nancy knocked at this one, no one answered, and she concluded they must be out.

"I will try the others as I go down," she thought, "first I must see what's at the top."

She seemed to climb for ever, and would not have been surprised to arrive at the moon, but at last came out, to her astonishment, only at the top of the tree after all. Even that seemed mountains high when she

looked down, and no wonder, when you remember that she was only an inch tall herself. She looked round, and noticed a sort of path leading along a branch, with here some twigs caught together and woven into a fence at the side, and there a strip of bark fastened between two stems to make a railing, so that you could walk easily and safely along and not fear to fall.

Nancy started down it at once, and away she went through the tree tops, passing from bough to bough by bridges thrown across the intervening spaces; sometimes a narrow enough plank to walk over, but always with a good stout cobweb rope alongside to hold on to.

She went on and on. The trees were mostly spruce; their dark green needles spread below her into such a dense carpet that she lost the sense of height, and no longer felt disinclined to look down when she crossed the bridges.

From time to time she paused and rested on some particularly inviting looking twig, or swung for a moment on a spray that was hovering in the breeze. There was very little wind, even up there among the tree-tops, and what little there was rustled softly and hesitatingly as if in two minds whether to stay away

altogether. As Nancy swung, she shut her eyes to listen to it, and almost it seemed as if it were the sea she heard murmuring and no wind at all.

Soon she jumped up and went on her way.

Gradually the path began to slope downwards, and after a long descent, she came unexpectedly in sight of a high wall, and found that she had got down to the ground again.

The way led along under the wall for a short time and then she came upon a tall gateway of iron, with plenty of room, however, between the bars, for so small a person as she to climb through.

This she did, and found herself on a long terrace, overlooking a park-like landscape, through which meandered the bluest river Nancy had ever seen.

All over the place was an extraordinary quantity of birds ; every bush and tree seemed covered with them and every patch of grass was almost hidden by all sorts and kinds of feathered creatures. Nancy remembered suddenly the quiet of the tree-tops, where she had not heard one bird raise its voice during her whole walk.

"This is where they all had got to, then," she said to herself. Certainly it seemed as if they all must have

got there; and yet more were constantly arriving; flying in singly, in pairs, and even in flocks, every few minutes. Near where she stood watching, a firtree had been taken possession of by tomtits, who were chaffing a crowd of their cousins, the great tits, long-tailed tits and cole tits, who had just come up, and finding every tree occupied, were forced to perch on the ground, to their great disgust. In the bushes swarmed such other small birds as wrens and robins, chaffinches, yellow-hammers, greenfinches, linnets, hedgesparrows, bull-finches and creepers, reed warblers and gold crested wrens, goldfinches and redstarts and dozens of other little birds; while down on the grass below the terrace, thrushes and blackbirds, woodpeckers and shrikes, herded with flocks of starlings; and larger birds such as plovers and rooks, pigeons and snipe, jays, jackdaws and all sorts of hawks and blinking owls filled the spaces down to the river, on whose banks were clustered multitudes of wildfowl of every kind. There was a little island in the river just below, and on it sat a solitary swan, the only one in that vast assembly.

Before venturing in among the crowd of birds, Nancy thought she had better make herself a little bigger, so

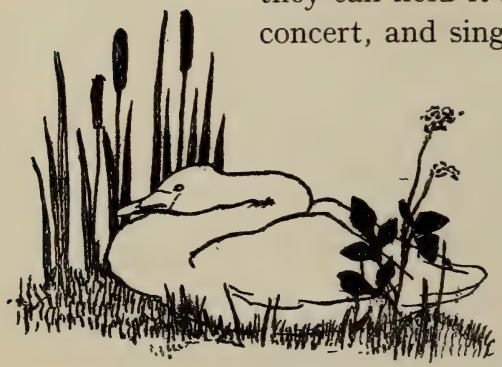
she turned her acorn quickly, and wishing herself a foot high, felt safe to advance. As she did so she heard a chuck chucking beside her, and there were Mr. and Mrs. Blackbird.

"Oh!" she cried in delight, "how nice that you should be here! Do, do tell me what it all means."

"This is Birdland," replied Mr. Blackbird, "and there is a great function on to-night. There is to be a state concert, and every bird with a wing to flap is coming to it. The swan is going to sing; they only sing once in their lives, and its wonderfully beautiful they say. I never heard one myself, and I feel quite excited about it, I can tell you!"

"Is that the one who is going to sing?" Nancy asked, pointing to the island.

"Yes that's the one; none of the others ever will come and listen when one of them sings. They are afraid they might be tempted to join in, and if they once do that, you know, they have to go; so they bottle up their songs as long as they possibly can, but at last, after years and years perhaps, there comes a time when they can hold it in no longer, and they summon a state concert, and sing, and go."



"Where do they go?" asked Nancy; but the blackbirds had seen a friend in the crowd, and were hopping off to speak to him.

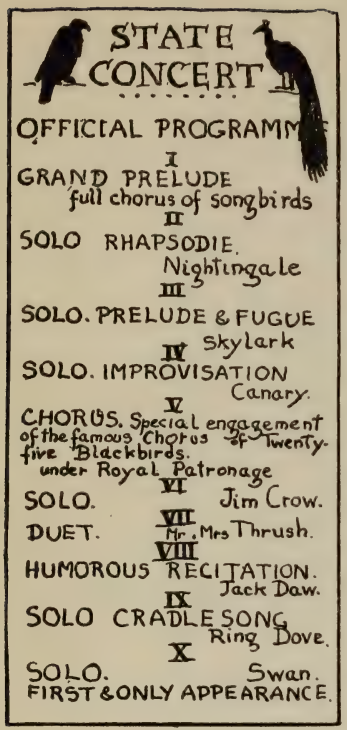
The child followed them at a little distance, and paused under a birch tree in which two nightingales were talking to each other.

"I feel so nervous, my dear," one was saying. "I am sure I shall break down. I hate singing in front of a crowd like this. I don't think they ought to ask us to. Why do they suppose I always sing at night after everyone has gone to sleep? Does anyone imagine I should sit up till that hour, night after night, if I weren't much too nervous to sing by day? At all events, I am. And I know I shall sing flat. Its simply horrible!"

"You'll be all right," said the other encouragingly, "you come first on the programme after the opening chorus. It's not as if you had to sing after the swan; that would be nervous work, I grant you; but he's going to sing last of all."

"Who else will there be?" asked the first nightingale. "I haven't seen the programme."

"Well," said his friend, "first there's the grand chorus of all the song birds; then you do your song; then






comes the lark; and I think after that the canary is going through some vocal gymnastics; then the blackbirds have a whistling quartette, and several of the other birds are going to perform. I forget in what order they come. Oh! there's one thing that will be funny. The crow insists on singing! They tried to persuade him not to, but he seems to be quite bent on it; I believe the bullfinch was cheeky enough to tell him he'd no voice, and he got frightfully annoyed about it. Said he was a bit hoarse at times, but, as far as his voice went, it was singularly beautiful and had been much admired. Only the other day, he said, the fox heard him in the wood, and was so struck by the melodious quality of his notes that he came right under the tree the crow was perched on, and called up compliments about it to him!"

Both the birds laughed, and the first nightingale remarked that the vanity of some people was such that they would believe anything, so long as it was flattering.

"I hear he's been taking lessons in singing," continued the other, "though who he found to give them to him, I can't imagine. Some people say he must have had them from a frog."

They laughed again, and Nancy moved on to a fir tree, from which came the sound of loud chattering and fluttering ; looking up under it she saw two magpies in the midst of what appeared to be a violent quarrel.

They were sitting on two of the lower branches, near each other, but not quite within reach ; and were using the most abusive language, to the delight of an ever increasing throng of small birds, chaffinches, robins, sparrows, and other little imps of mischief, who sat round them in a circle and egged them on as much as they dared.

"I tell you, you took it," one of the magpies was shouting, when Nancy came up. "You took my nice large silver teaspoon. Thief !"

"Thief yourself !" cried the other. "Where had you got it from ? Answer me that, you nasty, vulgar bird !"

"It was left me by the terms of my great grandmother's will," replied the first magpie, its feathers bristling with rage. "And well you know it, you have had your eye on it ever since !"

"Great grandmother's fiddlesticks !" screamed the other, "I suppose your saltspoon was left you too ? And your diamond ring ? And your thimble ? Bah !

I saw you take the spoon myself ; you got it from a picnic party when they were lunching in the glade. Horrid pickpocket ! That's what you are ! "

At that moment the birds suddenly observed Nancy, whom they had been too excited to notice, and a hush fell on the group.

The first magpie put its head on one side and remarked in a silky, if harsh voice, quite different to the tone which had been used by it before :

"So very glad to see you here to-day, my dear young lady ! I only hope you have not been forced to overhear any of the terribly vulgar conversation of this person," she waved a wing in the direction of the other magpie ; "a poor relation of mine," she went on confidentially, "and of a frightfully jealous disposition. She gets so angry, sometimes she is really not responsible for what she says ; and all because she has only got a few pieces of glass and some tin boxes to decorate her nest with, while I am the lucky possessor of several more valuable articles ; whose chief interest for me, however, lies in the fact that they were all tokens of esteem from various gentlemen magpies, or else part of the property bequeathed to me by my departed great

grandmother; a sainted lady!" She sighed, lifting her eyes to heaven, after one glance out of the corners of them at the other bird.

The latter was nearly bursting with rage; her feathers were ruffled up to such an extent that she looked twice her size, and she was dancing up and down on the bough till it shook and swung beneath her.

"Detestable liar!" she shrieked, "there's not one word of truth in what you say. I'm not a poor relation, and my nest is the most beautiful in the forest! I would not be related to a low, common thief like you! Besides I've often heard it said that your father was more like a rook. A horrid sort of freak magpie, you are, and every one knows that your white tail feather is pinned on!"

"It's not true! It's not true!" cried the other. "How dare you suggest such a thing?"

"Prove it then, by letting me have a pull at it," exclaimed the second magpie viciously, edging closer.

The other backed hurriedly up against the trunk of the tree and looked very disturbed. She was particularly proud of the white feather that adorned her tail. Most magpies only have them in their wings.

"Certainly not!" she cried indignantly, "I wouldn't think of allowing such a liberty! I don't know how you dare to talk like that. The whole thing is absolutely false!

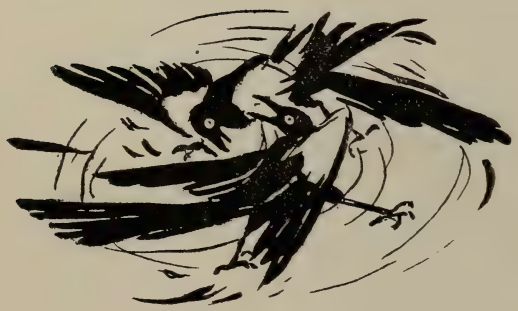
"Just what I say!" was the sarcastic retort, "I'm glad you admit it, though I didn't go so far as to say the whole tail was absolutely false! I only mentioned the white feather."

She turned away with a snigger to the surrounding crowd of little birds, who chuckled with appreciation.

This was too much for the insulted magpie. With a gasping cry she hurled herself on her foe, and in a moment they were both at it, hammer and tongs, feathers flying in all directions and the air resounding with their screams of rage.

Round and round they whirled, up and down, over and over, now one uppermost and now the other, now so inextricably mixed that Nancy couldn't tell which was which, and now drawing apart as if by mutual consent while each manœuvred for a better point of attack, only to be locked again in mortal combat a minute later.

The small birds cheered them on in huge glee at seeing



a fight, but Nancy was terrified, and cried out begging them to stop ; no one heeded her, and her voice was drowned in the noise of the struggle.

The fight was at its worst and the ground strewn thickly with feathers, among which the white feather that had been the immediate cause of the trouble, shone prominent, when a magnificent eagle sailed by, and hearing the uproar, approached the tree.

The effect was magical. With murmurs of "The Golden Eagle !" The Master ! The Great One !" the crowds of onlookers vanished so quickly that they seemed to melt into the air, and the two combatants, becoming aware of the stranger's advent, separated hastily, and retired panting into the thickest parts of the tree.

The eagle settled on a dead bough, and spoke in a loud hoarse voice,

"Come, come," he said, "what's all this ? Fighting on a feast day ! Well you know that that is absolutely forbidden by bird law. 'No violence of any kind to be used at assemblies of all feathers,' says the law ; and a lucky thing it is for some of you that it does say so, or I might feel tempted to enjoy a little sport where game

is so plentiful!" He laughed a deep, rumbling laugh, and all the birds within hearing smiled deprecatingly. They looked rather anxious, Nancy thought, and all tried to glare in a disapproving fashion at the magpies.

"You'd better come along with me to the judge," went on the eagle, "and he can decide how you shall be punished; I'd make short work of you myself," said he, "but it's none of my business to bother about such brawlers. Most disgraceful goings on!" And he hustled the culprits out of the tree and took them off to an old oak stump where a large white owl was sitting, administering justice on various birds whose behaviour had been disorderly.

Nancy followed, and was at once asked to give her account of the fight, which she did as accurately as she could; and other evidence having been taken, and the magpies both humbly admitting the facts, and saying they were very sorry and wouldn't do it again, they were allowed to depart unpunished, except by being forbidden to stay for the concert. The pair finally flew away together on the best of terms, but in a very crestfallen state.

Nancy strolled away also, and wandered up a long

grass path bordered with flowers, which stretched before her into the distance.

Some way down it she came to a place where it opened out into a wide velvety lawn, edged at one side with a low marble balustrade, overlooking the lake and park below. At the back of the lawn stood a tall ring of marble columns surrounding a basin where a fountain splashed and gurgled, and behind all, a shining white building with a golden roof, and long flights of white stone steps leading up to more marble colonnades.

The whole place was full of peacocks, which were strutting about with long tails sweeping the ground or spread in great fans to the sun. Peacocks were drinking at the fountain ; peacocks were perched on top of the colonnades ; peacocks going up and down the great stairs ; peacocks everywhere.

As she stood watching them, a voice sounded in her ears.

"Well, little Human," it said, "have you a hankering after court life ?"

And looking round, she saw the great eagle standing by.

"What do you mean, Sir ?" she asked puzzled.

"Why, this is the court of the peacock King." replied he; "he rules over all the earth birds, you know."

"Does he really?" said Nancy; "and who is King of the birds of the air?"

The eagle glanced at her rather suspiciously.

"There is no King of the upper air, at present," said he, "surely you know that! They are governed by their Emperor, as befits their loftier ways!"

"And who is the Emperor?" enquired Nancy.

The eagle laughed. "You are certainly a very ignorant little girl," he observed tolerantly; "that honour is mine! It is long indeed since I met anyone unaware of that fact." He laughed again in his hoarse voice.

"Oh Sir!" exclaimed Nancy, feeling that somehow she ought to have guessed his rank. "I am so sorry. I didn't know! And yet I felt that you were very different to the other birds," she went on, making him the best curtsey she knew how to.

"Ah! no doubt something in my glance or demeanour gave you the notion," said the bird, complacently, "one has an air, I daresay—but I go to visit his peacock majesty; would you like me to present you?

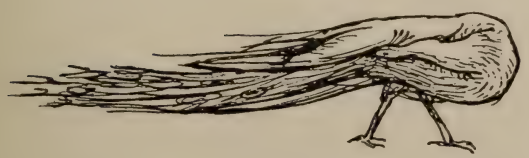
Some of my subjects usually entertain him with dancing on these occasions. You might like to see it ?"

"It would be too kind of you !" cried the child, following him eagerly as he proceeded towards the palace. The crowds of peacocks drew to one side as he passed, bowing and flourishing their tails in welcome. He led the way up the marble steps, and between the white columns to the arched entrance of a great hall, where four very large peacocks received them ceremoniously, and conducted them to an inner chamber, at the door of which they were left to enter alone.

It was a small room, lighted only from the roof, where there was a round window open to the sky, whose blueness was reflected in a little circular pool which occupied the space below ; the walls were entirely lined with mirrors, so that Nancy saw herself and the eagle in every direction.

Beyond, at the edge of the pool, was a tall perch of blackest ebony, on which stood a beautiful white peacock, who from his regal air and proud looks was evidently the King.

He swooped down to meet the Emperor, flourishing



his tail with many bows, and welcomed Nancy also when the eagle presented her.

"Greetings! Oh Sovereign of the upper airs," he said, "it is long since this pleasure was mine—the pleasure of receiving my royal cousin and friend! Where have you been these many weeks that I have hoped in vain for your coming?" And he led the eagle to a place on the perch beside himself.

"Dear cousin," said the Emperor, "I dare not come too often to visit you, lest the splendour of your court should make me discontented with my barbaric realms in the cold fastnesses of the mountains. If I had too much of the luxury and repose which I find down here I should be tempted to desert my post among the rocks; and I should soon be so dazzled by the beauty of your surroundings that my eyes would become weak, and I should lose my power of quelling the sun with my glance. Then no doubt it would seize the opportunity of burning up the earth."

These remarks seemed to please the King. He ruffled his feathers and looked pityingly at the eagle.

"My poor friend," he murmured, "you lead a hard life! But you must not think that mine is as idle as it

WITH NO COMPANION BUT MY OWN REFLECTIONS

seems. There is a saying in Birdland," he went on, turning for a moment to Nancy, "which tells us that, 'uneasy lies the head that wears an aigrette.' How true that is! If I appear to lie soft, nevertheless I work hard. In our position we cannot consider ourselves, but must think first of duty. Duty always! My imperial cousin's is, as he says, to make that insolent monster, the sun, feel the power of the eagle eye. Indeed, if he did not keep it in its place by staring it down from time to time, I tremble to think what would happen! My business, on the other hand, is to summon the rain when it is wanted. Without it, it would probably be impossible, in spite of the Emperor's power, to prevent the whole earth from being dried up in a very short while; but the clouds never fail to gather overhead when they hear my voice uplifted to call them. At other times it is my wretched lot to sit here, sad and alone, with no companion but my own reflections!"

He sighed deeply and glanced round the walls, where indeed his reflections appeared to stretch to infinity.

Nancy was quite of opinion that there could not be too many likenesses of him. She could not take her eyes off the splendid bird, with his shining white

feathers and long sweeping tail, which were decorated with spots, circles, and fringes of pure gold. His eyes were red as rubies, and on his head the aigrette, or coronet, was tipped with sapphires and emeralds. She continued to gaze at him while the birds talked, and paid little attention to the rest of the conversation.

After a short time the eagle took his leave, but the peacock, turning to Nancy again, and observing her admiring eyes, told her she might stay a little longer if she liked.

"I suppose you have never seen a King before, child ?" he said with a smile, as the eagle disappeared.

"No, sir," said Nancy. "Are they all as beautiful as you ?"

"Oh ! Poor things," said the King, "some of them are very well in their way. If I have an advantage in the matter of looks, it is more their misfortune than their fault ; we must pity, not blame, them. But the Fairy Prince, for instance, is much admired by some people. Rather small for my taste, and dresses so badly, poor fellow ! No idea of what suits him, you know. I daresay if he could grow some feathers, he'd be quite nice looking !"

"Oh! I always thought he was too handsome for words," said Nancy in a disappointing voice.

The King looked displeased.

"I daresay you would think so," he said coldly; "taste is a thing we cannot expect in the young and ignorant."

Slightly puzzled, Nancy returned again to her admiration of the beautiful peacock.

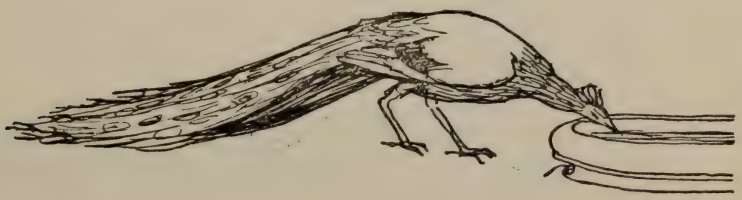
"Why do you sit in here, where no one can see you?" she asked timidly. "The other birds must be so sad out there without you."

This was more to the King's taste, and he looked at Nancy with an approving expression.

"Poor creatures, poor creatures," he murmured vaguely, not replying to the question; and then, in a considerate manner, he enquired if Nancy were not tired of standing.

"Shall I have a perch brought in for you, my dear? or, no—perhaps you would prefer the floor. Sit down and make yourself comfortable. You would like a little refreshment, I daresay? And a little entertainment, too, beyond the sight of my poor plumage!"

Nancy protested that she wanted nothing, but the



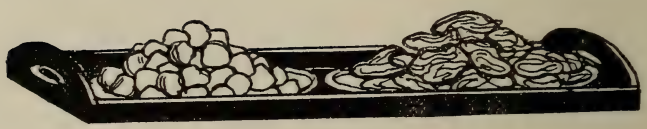
royal bird did not listen ; he stamped twice on his perch, and in ran the four large peacocks to receive his orders.

"Bring a collation for this young lady," they were told, "and let the dancers perform before us."

The attendants bowed low and retired. Soon two of them returned with a small tray, which they placed on the floor by Nancy's side.

On it was a plate of maize and another of raisins. She found the grains of maize terribly hard, and ate as few as she could, but the raisins were delicious.

As she was eating, a door in the wall opened, and introduced a company of several little animals and insects, which, having bowed low to the King, took up a position on one side of the room, and began to play a strange melody on various instruments that they had brought with them. Most of them seemed to be frogs or lizards, but she noticed a cricket and two grasshoppers who played very squeakily on the violin. Three white rats with their long tails wound round and twisted into the semblance of cornets, contributed very curious sounds ; while the frogs and lizards were provided, some with harps, and some with flutes, which



they played most skilfully. The whole orchestra was under the direction of a small black rabbit, who wielded a fiddle bow with great energy.

After a kind of prelude the music took on a dancing lilt, and in trooped a band of tall herons, who after bowing low, retired to the other side of the room, and gravely began to dance.

They danced very funnily, Nancy thought, and she felt much inclined to laugh, but didn't dare to, as the King was quite solemn.

The dancers circled round each other in pairs, pausing every other moment and kicking out their long legs, first to the right and then to the left, and presently beginning to flap their wings in time with the music, and to leap up in the air with great agility.

Faster and faster went the music, and higher and higher leapt the birds; faster and faster they leapt, and higher and higher they kicked and twirled, till it made Nancy giddy to look at them.

Then suddenly the players paused, and changed to a slow, doleful tune. As suddenly, the herons stopped their wild dance, and began twirling

slowly and sadly round each other, holding their wings in front of their heads in a dismal fashion.

Slower and slower went the dance till at last it stopped altogether, and the herons trailed out of the hall, still in the same dejected manner. The King clapped his wings together in applause.

"Didn't they do it well?" he exclaimed; "of course you saw that it was meant to signify, first their delight at seeing me, and in the end, their despair at having to leave."

Nancy had not guessed the meaning at all; but she said she thought it was a wonderful dance.

"How high they jumped!" she said.

"They jumped for joy," said the King, "the more joy, the higher the jump."

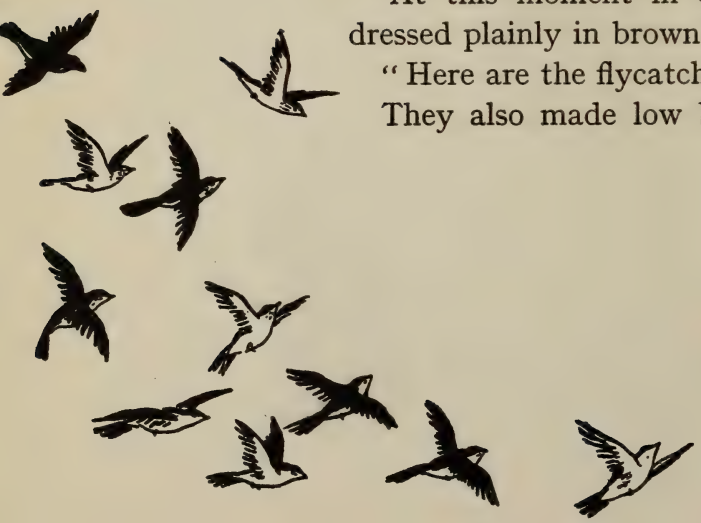
"They must have been very, very joyful," remarked the child.

"They were," replied the Peacock.

At this moment in came a crowd of little birds dressed plainly in brown and grey.

"Here are the flycatchers," the King told her.

They also made low bows to the Royal bird, and



then, as the band began to play a pretty twittering tune, the flycatchers started their dance.

They began by all crowding together, then, springing into the air, they flew with a rush, first to one side and then to the other; this they repeated several times, and finally came straight at the child and the peacock.

Nancy thought they would hit her in the face, and put up her hands involuntarily to protect herself, but the little birds stopped short a few inches away, and, after hovering a moment, returned across the pool. Then they dropped to the ground and disposed themselves in groups.

Suddenly in flew three white pigeons who posed on tiptoe in the midst. Then up they darted, and came down again head over heels in a whirl of flying feathers. Up and down they sped, looking like fluffy white balls as they tumbled and twisted and turned their somersaults, the dance ending in the flycatchers rising, and, forming a ring, flying round and round the pigeons in a giddy whirl.

The music came abruptly to an end, and the dancers vanished.

The King did not clap them as much as he had the

herons, and Nancy fancied he was looking decidedly sleepy.

However, he roused himself with a start as eight French partridges entered, who, after the usual bows, retreated to the opposite side of the little pool, and there began a peculiar dance.

"This is called the part dance," he said.

"Why ?" asked the little girl.

"Oh," replied the King in hurried tones, "partly because its short for partridges, you know, and partly because they all take part in it, and partly because they take partners for it, and partly because they only know part of it, and *chief*-partly because we part at the end of part of it !"

He stopped, out of breath, yawned widely and closed his eyes, leaving Nancy, quite bewildered, to watch the dancers, who were springing into the air and fluttering their wings together. Then they stood back to back in a circle while one of them ran round and round it with one wing trailing on the ground ; after a few times it stopped and clapped both wings, whereupon the nearest dancer joined it, and the two valsed off to a lonely corner.

Another bird started to run round the circle. This went on till in the end they were all dancing two and two in different places, except the couple that had been left to the last, and they circled round each other in the middle.

"That is the part where they choose partners, I suppose?" Nancy said to the King, who, however, appeared to be asleep.

Now the partridges began to dance round in a sort of grand chain, but they got so dreadfully mixed and muddled about it, and were always trying to pass on the wrong side or go round the wrong way, that at last some of them gave it up altogether and took to springing up and down a foot or two in the air in an aimless fashion, while one of them twirled round and round as fast as it could on one spot, till it got so giddy that it fell down and had to be helped up and twisted round the other way by its friends.

"This is certainly the part they only know part of!" thought Nancy, as the King snored gently beside her.

At last the birds seemed to get it right again, and all joining in a line, danced first back, then forward, then sideways, and then round once more, and finally separated into two parties and suddenly rushed out of

the door. At the same moment the music stopped on a jangling note, and the players, snatching up their instruments, fled away and disappeared. The peacock woke with a jump, gave one startled look round, and with a piercing shriek which sounded like "Good-bye," flew out through the hole in the roof.

Before Nancy had time to think, the four big peacock chamberlains had dashed in and surrounded her. They held in their claws a little hammock made of grass, and they cried to Nancy to get into it.

She obeyed at once, too much taken aback to ask questions, and, as she wasn't quick enough to please them, they pushed her in with their beaks, so that she tumbled headlong and lay rather frightened, while with a swirl and a rush the four birds lifted the hammock and flew with it out of the palace, and away, away.

They flew higher and higher, and Nancy shut her eyes as they rose far above the tree tops, but gradually gained courage and opened them again ; and as her fears left her, she began to feel how delicious it was to be carried through the air so swiftly and smoothly, and though she wondered where they were taking her, she almost hoped it was a long distance.

But very soon the peacocks ceased the beating of their wings, and spread them to soar downward; presently they touched the ground with a gentle bounce, and in a moment Nancy found herself tipped out of the hammock, and lying on the grass.

"We brought you back the quickest way," said one of the birds hurriedly, "because your nurse is looking for you, and there was no time to lose;" and with that he picked up the litter, tucked it under his wing, and without waiting to be thanked, they all leapt into the air and were off again.

Nancy scrambled up, and looking round saw that she was back in the old clearing in the wood, with the blackbirds' nest swinging between her and the blue sky, and down the path the white dress of her nurse showing through the leaves.

She had hardly time to turn the acorn in her pocket and cry 'Hey Presto' before she was seen.

"Where have you been, child," asked her nurse. I've been hunting everywhere for you, and now you seem to spring from the ground! Come along quick. It's past dinner time!"

## CHAPTER VI

# UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS

THE blackbird's eggs were hatched, and her friends so busy finding food for four hungry young birds that Nancy could no longer get either of them to play with her.

They had not even time to talk, except that Mrs. Blackbird would sometimes pause a moment to ask ecstatically, with her mouth full of grubs, "Aren't they the perfectly loveliest babies anyone ever saw?" before she dealt a mouthful round to each of her children, and flew off to get them something else; for they were never satisfied, and always loudly clamouring for more.

Nancy did not feel able to say truthfully that she

thought them very beautiful at first, as they were quite naked and terribly thin and skinny and red, but luckily Mrs. Blackbird never waited for an answer, and could not have believed that anyone really did not agree with her, if she had.

After a little while, however, the fledglings feathers began to grow, and they were soon soft, downy brown things quite worthy of their mother's pride.

Nancy tried to get them to talk to her, but they were still too young for sensible conversation, and only cried, "We're hungry ! we're hungry !" whatever she said, so that after a day or two she gave it up and wandered about the wood, making friends with the other creatures who lived in it.

She called on the rabbits in the rabbit flats on the way to the underworld, and was relieved to find that the hobgoblins had not undermined their foundations to any fatal extent. She found that the Bunny families were poor, shiftless things with enormous numbers of children, making no provision for the winter, and so careless that they nearly always forgot even to shut their front doors against the stoats; while, when she implored them to be more cautious, and to lock and

bolt them regularly, they only shed foolish tears, and said that all the bolting they could do was out of their back door holes when the ferret came into the burrow.

She went to visit Mrs. Mouse in her neat little dwelling below the roots of the silver fir. The only drawback to it was that the windows were very small and tightly shut, and there was a dreadfully strong smell of mouse.

Mrs. Mouse seemed a very chilly person, and wore a thick fur coat, even indoors on a warm day. She was, however, most pleasant and kind to Nancy, and showed her all round her little house ; there were only three rooms, all very tidy and rather bare, all lined with large cupboards where Mrs. Mouse stored her food for the winter. She opened the doors, and showed Nancy shelves and shelves covered with pots made out of walnut shells carefully sawed in half, so that the top half made a lid which she lifted off to disclose the contents.

The first dozen were filled with wheat, the second with barley, and others with flower seeds ; a few held the seeds of weeds and grass.

In the last cupboard were five crocus bulbs of which the mouse was very proud.

"I hid behind a leaf and watched the gardeners planting them," she said, "there were heaps, but of course I knew I should not be able to manage many, and I was anxious to get the best sort. So I listened to the men talking, and heard one say to the other.

'Better put that little lot in the front,' he said. 'They're a new sort, her Ladyship told me, and she sets great store by them.'

"Hearing that, I thought to myself, 'That's the kind for me, no doubt; at all events. I'll try them.' So I waited till dark, and then I went to the place, and dug and dug till at last I got one up. It took me a long while to get it home, for it's a tidy distance to the garden from here, and I couldn't do it all that night, and had to leave the bulb all day hidden between some stones; but I persevered the next night and at last I managed to get it here in safety. It took me most of the autumn to harvest the rest of them, and do what else I had to do as well. But now you see, I've still got five left for next year, and I daresay I shall get some more."

"I don't think you will," said Nancy. "I heard my

Mother say she wouldn't plant any more crocuses because the mice took them all."

"Nasty selfish creature!" exclaimed the mouse.

"You mustn't say that about my Mother," cried Nancy indignantly, "she's not selfish, and I don't think it's very nice of you to steal her crocuses."

"Hoity toity!" returned Mrs. Mouse. "Her crocuses indeed! Let me tell you that everything in the garden belongs to us and our friends the rabbits, not to speak of the slugs and snails and caterpillars, and other creatures! Our families have owned the land since long before yours ever came near it. Horrid interlopers, that's what you are, and if I had known whose child you were, I'd not have invited you to my house!"

So saying, with great dignity, and a bristling coat, she showed Nancy to the door, and they parted in a manner far from friendly.

The little girl was rather shy after this of calling on strangers, but one day, going up the tree stairs, she met Mr. Squirrel, who begged her to come in and see his wife in their nice airy house in the tree top, and though it certainly was not as tidy as Mrs. Mouse's, Nancy liked it much better. It, also, was lined with cupboards

which had been filled with nuts and beech masts and chestnuts in the autumn.

But the squirrels had eaten them all since then, and had left the shells lying on the ground, and had not even bothered to shut the cupboard doors, so that the litter was something fearful ; great heaps of nutshells reaching nearly to the ceilings, and no room to sit anywhere.

"We really must clear it up one of these days," said the squirrels in hopeless tones.

"Or else take a new house," added one of them. "there soon won't be room for us here !"

"I declare you are as bad as the rabbits," cried Nancy "let us start at once and make things tidy ! I'll help you !"

The squirrels didn't like the idea of starting at once, even with help; but, Nancy beginning to pick up the shells, and to throw them out of the window and down to the ground, they were fired by her good example and set to work with a will.

They got tired of it, however, before much was done, and all Nancy could manage was to persuade them to promise to go on with the clearing up next day.

After that she called every day and encouraged them to fresh efforts, till at the end of a week the last shell had been thrown out, and the whole house was empty and clear.

The squirrels swept the floors, using their bushy tails for brooms, and everything was clean and tidy as a new pin.

They were delighted when it was finished, and joining hands with Nancy, they danced round and round in a ring, till they were all exhausted and sank down, panting but happy.

When Nancy bade them good-bye she felt she had done great deeds.

As she went down the winding stair that day, she fancied she perceived a peculiar smell which got stronger as she descended. Soon her ear caught a sound, and she paused to listen. Pad, pad, pad, little feet were coming quietly up the steps, and sniff, sniff, went their owner as he came along. As Nancy hesitated, he came into view, a great white ferret with crimson eyes, and sharp white teeth. He stopped at the sight of Nancy, his long body and tail still hidden by the curve of the stairs.

"What's this?" he cried, "a human child! The smallest I ever saw, to be sure! What are you doing here, spoiling the scent? Don't you see," said he, "that I'm hunting? And that you're in the way? Did the rabbit pass you just now?"

Nancy backed into a doorway, frightened by his fierce scowl.

"No," she murmured; "no rabbit."

"Don't try to deceive me," said the animal; "the scent is fresh, and you must have met him between here and the tree-top!

"I haven't been to the tree-top," said Nancy more boldly, "but I don't think you will find him there; there's a fairy path from the top of this tree, you know, and he will have escaped by that, and be in Birdland by now."

"What's that you say?" exclaimed the ferret. "If that's true it's no use my taking any more trouble. The fairies won't allow me on their paths. Bother them! I wouldn't allow them anywhere, if I had my way! It's just like Cooper's stupidity to come to a burrow with a backdoor leading to Fairyland! I suppose you know Cooper?"

"Cooper," repeated the child, "do you mean my Daddy's keeper? I see him sometimes. He has got a nice dog called Bob. Do you belong to him?"

"Certainly not!" snapped the ferret, "he belongs to me. He is the man I have to take me out hunting; he carries me from burrow to burrow; it saves time, and I don't care much for walking in the damp. As a matter of fact, he's somewhere in the wood now, but when the boy forgot to fasten the box and I slipped out, they didn't notice me, so I nipped in here while they went on; and now I shan't get my dinner for goodness knows how long!"

He glared at her for a minute, and then a horrid grin crept over his face.

"I never tried a human child," he said slowly. "but I've bitten Cooper now and then, and he doesn't taste so bad. Not as good as a fat young rabbit, but still—when one is hungry—Are there any pins about you?" he demanded abruptly. "I hate pins."

Poor Nancy, cowering in the doorway, was so terrified she couldn't answer. The wicked meaning of the beast's words was too plain to mistake. For one second the thought of running up the tree occurred to her;

but she knew she would be caught long before she reached the fairy path, and besides she could never bear to turn her back to those cruel jaws. She tried desperately to conjure up some other means of escape. The fairy acorn was no good, there was no room to grow larger on that tiny staircase.

The creature came a step nearer and she shrieked with fear; but he only laughed a hateful laugh.

"No pins, eh?" he asked, "then I think I shall have quite a good dinner after all!"

"Help! Help!" screamed Nancy, but there was no answer.

"This will be something to tell my friends," went on the ferret; "this will be something to tell my wife when I get home to-night! This will make their mouths water!"

He seemed to take a delight in spinning out the agony, and in watching her terror.

She put back her hands and beat loudly on the door behind her, crying again for help.

"If I could only find the bell!" she thought; but she could not turn, or take her eyes off the monster's, which shone like red danger lamps in the dusk of the tree

trunk. She saw that he was gathering himself together for a spring, and gave herself up for lost, but, as he dashed forward, hurling himself at her throat, the door against which she leant, half fainting, gave way behind her, and she fell backwards to the ground.

A large yellow beak shot out over her and met the attack with a vigorous peck, which was so little what the murderer looked for, that he paused a moment before coming again.

During this instant of hesitation a great claw caught Nancy's prostrate form, and dragged it inside the doorway.

Then, as the brute pulled himself together and sprang once more, the door was slammed in his very teeth, and the sound of bolts being pushed home was the only answer to his howls of rage and disappointment.

Inside, Nancy still lay an inert little heap, only half conscious of what had happened. Presently she heard a gruff voice saying in kind tones.

"That was a near shave for you, my dear." And became aware in the dusky light, of what seemed a soft, white cushion, beside her. She crept closer to it and began to cry softly ; a white wing was wrapped

round her, and words of comfort murmured in her ear.

Gradually she recovered herself and realised that she was safe.

"But Oh! Take care of me! take care of me!" she sobbed, "I am so frightened!"

"There, there," said the kind voice, "you're perfectly safe now, poor little dear. I'll take care of you, don't be afraid!"

The ferret, after battering and yelling at the door for some time, gave it up as hopeless, and they heard his soft footsteps retreating down the stairs. He had decided to try another rabbit burrow.

A few minutes later a boy's voice floated up to them.

"Here he is, father," it called in excited tones, "he's a coming out of this here old tree!"

And then a minute later another voice asked:

"Have you got 'un?" and Nancy recognised the accents of Cooper.

"Yes," replied the boy; and after that they heard no more, but Nancy knew that her enemy had been captured, and breathed freely again.

By this time her eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom and she was able to make out that her rescuer

DO DRY YOUR EYES, MY CHILD. . .

was none other than a big white owl, who continued to soothe and comfort her in its gruff but kindly way.

"There," it said now, "that's Cooper and his boy; they've caught that odious ferret, and you need not be frightened any more. Do dry your eyes, my poor child. Have a feather handkerchief!" And he handed Nancy the smoothest, softest hanky she had ever felt.

"I'm not very fond of Cooper as a general thing. Indeed the matter of my poor husband's death last month," continued the owl, wiping away a tear, "has never been satisfactorily cleared up. Still I must say that there was no evidence to prove that Cooper had a hand in that dreadful business, and he is useful sometimes, as to-day for instance; but he might do more to discourage kestrels, who eat too many mice, the greedy poaching creatures! Just fancy, they go mousing by day! Quite against all the game laws, of course, as even a cat knows, and most unsporting conduct I call it, worthy of a weasel! Ah! mouse hunting is not what it used to be in my young days," she went on, shaking her head. "Not that mice aren't plentiful and fat, but the competition is something frightful! Years ago, my parents and I were the only owls for miles around, but

now, every other tree has been taken by one ; there are three families in this wood, if you'll believe me, and all hungry !" She shook her great head again, and then :

"But you haven't seen my babies, my dear ; come over and look at them if you are feeling better."

Nancy got up and followed her over to a corner where a little light trickled through a crack, and she could just make out two pairs of yellow eyes, surrounded by what looked at first sight like two large white powder puffs, but which were really two baby white owls, all a downy fluff. She had never seen anything so sweet and soft and foamy, and said so rapturously, to the delight of the mother owl.

"But I wish it was a little lighter in here," Nancy couldn't help remarking, "so that I could see them better."

"Dear, dear !" said Mrs. Owl, "are your eyes so bad you can't see clearly in this light ? At your age too. What a sad thing. I expect you've been out in the daytime? That's about it! A most dangerous thing to do ! The proper plan is to sit at home, and close all the shutters till the sun is well down, as I do. Be careful to do that, and you won't have any more trouble

with your sight. In the meantime come over here where it's darker ; and I daresay you'll be able to see better."

"But of course I shan't," laughed the child, "anyone knows you can't see better in the dark !"

"Oh ! indeed !" said the owl, in an offended tone, "who told you that, I should like to know. Perhaps you think you know everything and everyone. Or anything? Anyone knows, indeed! I don't suppose for a moment that a child like you knows anyone at all!"

"I really do though," cried Nancy. "I don't know everyone or everything, certainly, but my mother says I know a great deal for my age, and I'm sure I know anyone ; or at least someone," she concluded lamely.

"I shouldn't be the least surprised at your knowing someome," said the owl, "there's nothing in that. The question is, if you were invited to the Fairy Queen's ball next week, though of course she wouldn't dream of inviting a child like you, but if you were, would you know anyone ? Answer me that !"

"I suppose I shouldn't," said Nancy, downcast, "unless the Dryad of the oak was there," she added more hopefully, "or some of the Gnomes."

"I don't think the Dryad would like you to refer to her as just anyone," said the owl severely; "she is quite a personage, on the contrary. You obviously don't know anyone, as I said from the beginning. I hope it will be a lesson to you not to contradict your elders and betters. I will excuse you this time as you are young, and so very small, but you ought to have a little more idea who you are talking to. As you seem unaware of the truth, I don't mind telling you that I happen to be the only person in the world who does know everything worth mentioning. What I don't know hardly answers to that description. In fact," said the owl solemnly, "if it were not that, if I have a fault, it is modesty, I might tell you that all that exists in the way of knowledge, is on familiar terms with me. Think of that now!"

Nancy was duly impressed; partly by the look of immense wisdom with which the speaker drew herself up and waited with her head on one side for a reply.

"It must be splendid to know everything," she said "I suppose you know all the stories there are. Do, do tell me some!"

"I've no time to waste telling stories," said the owl,

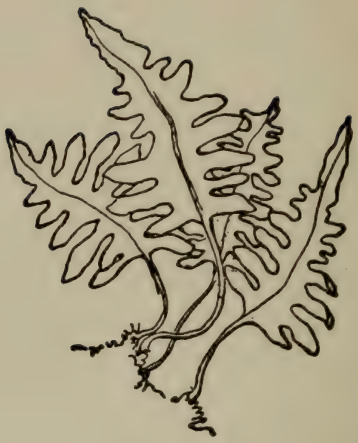
still a little offended. "You don't seem to realise that this is the middle of the day, when all well conducted persons are fast asleep! If I sit here much longer talking to you, I shall be only half awake to-night, and let most of the mice escape me. The moon will be up early, too, and I shall need all my wits and agility. I don't suppose you are likely to meet anyone else," said the owl, haughtily, "who knows beforehand, when the moon will appear. But I do! She'll come peeping over the hill at ten o'clock, you mark my words, and go climbing up till she's above the lake, and can gaze at her own reflection in the water. Poor thing! She's done that ever since I can remember, if she's had a chance. It's an hallucination she suffers from. You've heard of people being moonstruck? Well, that's what she is; moonstruck by her own likeness in the water. She's got it into her head that there's another moon down here, and the winds who have charge of her are often obliged to wrap her up in clouds for fear she should try to jump down and join the other one. It's a sad case, very . . . Frets herself to death, they tell me, because the moon in the water is always winking and blinking at her, and she thinks he's making fun at her."

"Poor moon, I'm sorry she's unhappy," murmured Nancy.

"A contented disposition, that's the thing to have in this world," said the wise bird. "I have a hard enough life of it, never off my wings all night, you may say, slaving to provide food for those hungry brats of mine. But look at me. What do I do when my poor husband comes by a violent death, and the neighbourhood is infested with hawks owing to the neglect and stupidity of that dreadful man, Cooper? Do I sit down and ruffle my feathers over my head as some people would, letting the babies starve that I may indulge my feelings? No. Not I. I start out earlier, and I come back later, and I don't go dancing and hooting about with the other owls as I did in the good old days; but what of that? I sleep all the sounder by day. It's a wonder indeed that I ever woke to hear you at the door. If it wasn't that I have been rather disturbed lately by nutshells falling down the chimney and bouncing all over the room, I might have slept through the whole thing, and where would you be now, my dear, if I'd done that?"

She had talked herself into quite a good temper again, but Nancy couldn't help thinking that she would be

glad to get to sleep once more. So after trying to express her gratitude to her preserver, she said she must be going; and, the door being unbolted, ran as fast as she could down the winding stair, and heaved a sigh of relief when she came out safe in the wood below. She quickly used the magic acorn, and ran back to her nurse, who was quite surprised at not having to go and look for her as usual.



## CHAPTER VII

# LADY-SLIPPERS

THE days got longer and longer and the weather began to be hot. The grass in the park sprang up tall and thick and soon Nancy had forsaken the woods for the joys of the hayfields. What fun she had tossing the hay, and helping to rake it up, and to make it into cocks ; then how delightful to climb to the top, and to roll down the soft sides ; and to do this over and over again !

Sometimes, when the process had been repeated for half an hour, you would hardly have recognised the haycock which had begun by pointing so proudly to the sky. It would give up the effort to keep a neat thimble shape, and, tired out by endless assaults, sink down in an exhausted condition and no longer attempt to look like anything more dignified than a pudding.

Then Nancy, perhaps herself a little tired, certainly very hot, would scoop a hole in the middle and nestle down in it as in a nest, banking the scattered hay up into a cushion behind her till you could only see the top of a curly head. Sometimes by mistake, a thistle was in the cushion, and it used to make its presence known by resentful prickings. There were lots of little beetles and grasshoppers who talked in Nancy's ear all at once in a myriad tiny voices, so low that she could hardly ever make out what they were saying, and so close that it tickled her to listen.

When the carting began, the great amusement was to sit on the broad back of the fat carthorse in the shafts, and, holding firmly to the pad, to ride up and down the fields, while the pile of hay rose higher and higher on the wagon behind her, as the men on the ground tossed it up on their pitchforks to their fellow workmen on top, to be packed and arranged into a level, steady load. Finally came the triumphant progress to the ricks, which hourly grew larger and more mountainous till they far out-topped last year's stacks. These seemed to shrink ashamed into themselves as if conscious of their brown and withered appearance.

At last all was finished, the last load carted and on the stack in dry and good condition, and while Nancy's father and his agent were congratulating themselves and each other on having got it all safely in, Nancy could have cried to think it was all over till next year.

Feeling quite sad, she wandered out into the orchard, thinking she would go and tell the bees, whose hives were there, all about it; glancing round to see that no one was in sight, she turned the magic acorn till she was about an inch high, so as not to alarm the insects by her approach, for she did not want to get stung.

As she passed along a sunny bank under the apple trees, she caught sight of a little figure scarcely larger than herself, moving on the bank above her. She stood motionless and peered round a dock leaf to see what it was, and soon made out four or five little men busy among the thick plants of "lady's slipper" which covered the bank. She saw that they were watering each little bush carefully out of red watering cans, their silvery-blue clothes shining and sparkling so that they looked very like the water themselves.

When they turned their backs she had a glimpse of

shimmering wings, and knew in a moment they must be fairies.

Presently one of the little men who was not doing any work, but seemed to be directing the others, caught sight of her head peeping over the dock, and immediately came forward. He looked no more than a boy, and was smiling cheerfully.

"How do you do?" said he, with a bow, and a flourish of his little green hat. "No doubt you are Nancy, whom the oak Dryad has told us about? Let me introduce myself; my name is Sparkle, and I am attached to the court of the Fairy Queen."

"Yes, I am Nancy," she replied shyly. "I came to talk to the bees."

"I think they are all out, fetching in the honey harvest just now," said the fairy, "you, I think, have been haymaking? The grasshopppers spoke of you. They have been worrying themselves lest you should be built into the haystack by mistake, I believe, because you were so often hidden in the hay; they thought you'd go to sleep and be picked up and put on a wagon without being noticed, and have been quite in a panic about it. One of them came to the court a day

or two ago, and begged Her Majesty to interfere. He said that he and all his friends did nothing but beseech you to be careful, but that you paid no attention!"

"They have such very low voices," said Nancy, "and they would all speak at the same time; I never could really hear what they were talking about. Besides they are so very tickly when they crawl up one's neck and whisper in one's ear. But it was very kind of them to be anxious about me."

"They are goodhearted little things," said the boy; "but you should always listen when anyone talks to you in the fields or woods. The outdoor people don't talk much to strangers unless they have something important to say; when there is no hurry about a thing, they generally sing it. At least they would all say they were singing, though some of them have a queer idea of tune and sound.

"The cats and peacocks and jays, for instance, not to speak of the donkey, and a host of others. The frogs, of course, specially pride themselves on being musicians of the first water, and some of them play quite well, though their voices are open to criticism. Talking of

frogs and water," he continued, "do you know why I am here to-day?"

"You are looking after the gardeners who are watering the lady's slipper, aren't you?"

"Yes, but do you know why there is so much lady's slipper grown in Fairyland? No? Well, I daresay the story would amuse you," and inviting Nancy, with a gesture, to take a seat on the bank, he threw himself on a mossy cushion beside her, and began the following tale.

"You must know," said Fairy Sparkle, "that long ago there was a fairy named Lucima, who was no less beautiful and accomplished than other fairies. But she was a strange creature, with tastes very different from those of most fairy ladies, who are quite happy to take their pleasure together, dancing in the fairy rings when the moon shines, and swinging in spider hammocks when they are tired of dancing.

Of course they all have plenty of work to do to keep them busy, I am only talking of their playtime. Well, while her friends were twirling and circling to the strains of the court orchestra, Fairy Lucima liked better to wander away by herself to the banks of the river,

and there she would fish for minnows with a great rod three times her own length, made of the top shoot of a bamboo that had been planted by the river side, and a long, strong line woven for her specially by the spiders, which she rolled up neatly into a snail-shell fixed like a reel at the butt end of the rod ; she cleverly contrived to bore a hole in the shell, and inserted a handle with which she could wind in the line, but it wasn't altogether satisfactory, and often stuck. Her fish hooks she made out of thorns, and some of the birds gave her feathers with which she tied all sorts of minnow flies.

The minnows that she caught she gave to the moor-hens and kingfishers, who in return were careful not to disturb the water where she was fishing. As time went on she became fonder and fonder of this amusement, and at last could hardly tear herself away from the river, and grudged the time spent in going to and fro from her woodland home, till eventually she decided to take up her abode altogether in some spot nearer to the scene of her favourite pastime.

There were no fairy houses near the river, which ran through the low meadows and marshes of the valley, some distance from the upland woods where the Queen

and court hold their revels, and Fairy Lucima decided to build a dwelling for herself to suit her own taste.

After some hesitation she finally chose a site on a boggy piece of ground beside the stream, and there, in a little thicket of bog myrtle and rushes, she made a clearing, and erected a little house just big enough for one person, on land just high enough to be out of reach of floods, and yet filled day and night with that sound of running waters which was music in her ears.

All round the house stretched a garden, yellow in spring with kingcups, in summer rainbowhued with meadowsweet, forget-me-not, mint, willowherb, and the white saucers of grass of Parnassus.

Here for a while lived Fairy Lucima very peacefully and happily.

But you must not imagine that her appearance in the neighbourhood had aroused no comment or objection. On the contrary, all the kelpies and watersprites were very indignant at the intrusion, for so they considered it. As a matter of fact, it would have been more polite of Lucima to have consulted them, but she had not done so, and, as often happens, this want of civility was the cause of much future trouble.

The water fairies, except the Naiads, are as you know, quite a different race to any of the land fairies. They are a mischievous, cold-blooded tribe, hating anything that savours of dry land, far from friendly to humans, resentful of interference with their domain, and delighting in any trick or trap they can contrive with which to tease and distress the unwary.

Many were the indignation meetings held to discuss and protest against the unheard of conduct of Fairy Lucima.

The younger kelpies wanted to go in a body, and turn her out of the house, while the water sprites voted for pulling it down about her head, though this was mere brag, as they hated to leave the water.

So other plans to injure her were proposed.

'We'll teach her to come and catch our pet minnows,' cried the valiant water people.

However, the Naiad who lived in the reeds near by, when appealed to for encouragement, disparaged these ideas.

'I don't see that the young fairy is doing any harm at all,' she said; 'the amount of minnows she catches in a week isn't half what a small trout will kill in a day,

and they needn't take the hook if they don't want to. They can always do as they please about that ; it's not as if she ran them down and swallowed them. If they are so silly and so greedy as to take her flies after you have solemnly warned them not to, as they do day after day, they have really only themselves to blame. If any of you injure Fairy Lucima's house or herself in any way, I shall take a pleasure in seeing that you do not go unpunished. For my part I only hope that she will inaugurate a fashion, and that our neighbourhood may become a watering place for all the court ; it would do the place a great deal of good.'

These remarks had a very damping effect on the crowd ; though you would hardly have thought it possible it should become damper than it invariably was.

It broke up after this and went sadly home ; but a few of the most malicious sprites did not altogether give up the idea of annoying the fairy in some way, and after talking it over among themselves during the following days, they concocted a plan which seemed to them to promise great results.

They waited for a very wet day (for dry air was a thing none of them could abide), and then one of them

might have been seen to hoist himself quickly out of the river and scramble on to the bank, from which he began to make his way across the marshy ground where stood the fairy's house. Though torrents of rain were falling, he was obliged to pause once or twice and plunge into a boghole full of water to refresh himself, as the water people are dreadfully uncomfortable out of their native element. At last he reached a fair sized pool not far from the house; and dived in with a gasp of relief. He swam round it, apparently searching for someone, till his eyes fell on a large fat frog sitting sleepily on a water-lily leaf.

'Good morning, Madam,' said he, with a graceful bow, perching himself on the stalk of a neighbouring flower. 'I come as a representative of the sprites in the river yonder, to thank you for the delightful concerts you have been giving lately, in the pools. Our evenings have been made something to look forward to, I assure you!'

'Most kind of you to say so, Sir,' said the fat frog, waking with a start, 'most flattering, I'm sure, to have our humble efforts noticed. I really think the chorus has not been discreditable this summer. You have no

doubt been struck by the increased volume of sound, due, I may say, to a large family of my own growing up, and showing quite a turn for music.'

'The choruses have been excellent,' said the sprite, 'such an enthusiasm and unanimity as they show! A little more training of the voice, perhaps, would not be a disadvantage, but still, on the whole, quite excellent! But what we were particularly struck with was the voice of the solo singer; I should very much like to congratulate that lady in person. Her croak is more than remarkable; it has a carrying power! A sustained thrill! together with a most uncommon individuality, and a hoarseness which I think I have never encountered before. Last night she gave a truly wonderful performance, and it is mainly to seek out that talented singer that I have been sent to-day. I shall be most grateful if you can direct me to her residence; I am sure you must all feel very proud of having such a genius among you!'

The frog simpered and smiled a fat smile.

'Oh, Sir!' said she, 'after all you've said I hardly like to tell you! But as a matter of fact, it is I who sing the solos. It is indeed gratifying to hear that they

are so much appreciated.' And she began to swell visibly with satisfaction and vanity.

The wicked little sprite, who knew perfectly well the whole time whom he was talking to, was very pleased when he saw his compliments having so much effect, and hastened to pile on more flattery till Madam Frog swelled to such an extent that the water-lily was half submerged. Then he began to give the conversation a different turn.

'Your children's voices are decidedly most promising,' he said, 'but, if I may offer a suggestion, what a difference it would make to them to go through a regular course of training! A few months at the Academy of Frogville, for instance, where they would have masters experienced in smoothing away all technical difficulties, and your family would become hardly less accomplished than yourself!'

'Ah! Frogville,' sighed the lady frog, 'how I have always longed to visit that wonderful city. The home of my race! But, alas, my husband, Mr. Frog, becomes so dreadfully cross if I even mention the word, that I fear I shall never persuade him to take us there. I suppose you have visited it, Mr. Sprite? I really hardly

know anything about it, as no frog from these parts has ever been so far down the river.'

'I was down there only last week,' replied the shameless water sprite, who had never been in the great marshes at the mouth of the river, where the frogs have their capital, in his life. 'Ah, that is the place for musicians like you! Music, music, all day long. And the very best, mind you! None of your amateur squeaking for Frogville. Nothing but the best professional croakers. How they would welcome you, Madam! In all their ranks, I never heard a voice that could touch yours. You must really try to pay them a visit.'

'Alas and alack!' cried the frog, 'if it could only be! but the expense puts it out of the question for us poor up-river frogs.'

'It is certainly a very expensive place to live in,' agreed the sprite, 'not only is food dear, but the customs and habits of life are very luxurious and extravagant. For instance, the roads there are kept as carefully and neatly as the floors of houses; every one of them is strewn with lily leaves each morning, partly to beautify them, and partly to save the inhabitants the inconvenience of getting their feet wet.'

'Dear me!' exclaimed his companion, who since she was hatched, had never known whether her feet were wet or dry. 'You don't say so!'

'It is nevertheless the case,' continued the sprite, who was inventing every word he was saying. 'It is said in Frogville, that you should either be in the water or out of it. Wet, or dry. But not half in, or half out. It is a new fashioned idea, of course,' he added, 'but they are very keen on it now in the aristocratic quarters and there are even frogs who hold that it is absolutely dangerous to wet the feet unless the rest of the body is in the water. I was talking to the chief lady singer at the opera the other night, and she told me she considers her magnificent voice is entirely due to her care in keeping her toes dry and warm. At all events, whether they are right or wrong, the lily carpeted streets look very cool and attractive, and no one can deny that it does one's shoes no good to be wet all day, however it may affect one's feet.'

'Shoes!' said the frog; 'but who wears shoes?'

'Why, everybody in Frogville wears them, my dear lady,' the water sprite told her, 'every frog in the place except the lowest of the low; tramps and people

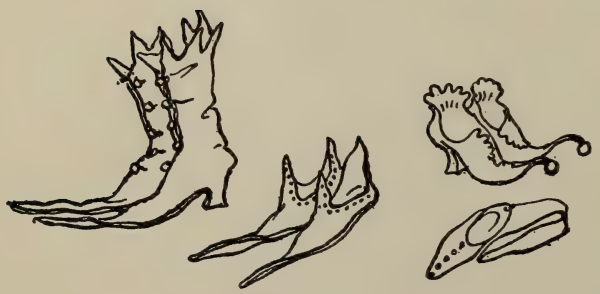
of no account. It is the universal custom. And not only do they wear shoes, but the better classes very seldom wear the same pair twice. I assure you, that never have I seen such a variety of shoes of all kinds and colours; every other shop is a bootmaker's!'

The frog was so astonished she could only gasp, and was quite incapable of saying another word, so that, thinking he had impressed her enough, the sprite said farewell, and returned, grinning, the way he had come, feeling confident that the seed he had sown had fallen on good soil.

Evening fell and the fat frog still sat where he had left her, marvelling on what she had heard. How she longed to go to the wonderful Frogville where she would be appreciated at her true worth, which, as she saw very well now, had never yet been the case.

Oh! she must go! If she had to hop all the way. The frogs in these little morasses were not able to understand a real genius like herself, and it was only fair to give the Frogville people the chance of hearing a really fine voice.

But how could she appear among them on her naked feet if everyone there wore shoes except tramps and



suchlike ? It would be too humiliating. Perhaps, even, they would not listen to her if she arrived in such a state !

As she still sat on the lily-leaf trying to think out some plan, the dusky night spread over the bog, and by her, in the shadows, stepped the lithe figure of Fairy Lucima, her rod on her shoulder, a creel over her arm, and on her feet, a pair of scarlet shoes.

I am sure you would have liked to see her as she swung past, for one does not often get a chance of seeing fairies dressed for bad weather.

On this cold wet night she had of course left her wings at home, as the wind and wet make short work of such diaphanous affairs. They were safe at home in a cupboard, carefully wrapped in lily-petals, and she was wearing a long coat of duck feathers, the downy green feathers from a mallard's neck, which was perfectly waterproof and warm. A little feather cap on her golden hair to keep it dry, and a pair of shoes for her twinkling feet, formed the rest of her attire.

Fairies do not like to cover their pretty feet if they can help it, and when they are flying would never think of doing so. But most of them wear shoes on the ground,

which is too rough for their soft little toes, and Lucima especially needed them on the watery path across the bog.

She smiled kindly at Madam Frog as she passed her in the gathering gloom, but the greeting was not returned : perhaps the darkness had prevented its being noticed, or was it that the fat croaker's eyes had been intent on something else ?

She remained where she was, buried in her thoughts. Presently she roused herself, and uttered a few hoarse notes as if to try her voice. Then she began to sing a frog song, but stopped in the middle in an absent minded way, and heaved a tremendous sigh :

'Her feet are longer than mine, and if I squeezed all my toes together I believe those shoes would just fit me !' said she ; and sank again into a reverie, from which she was roused by the voice of a friend at her elbow.

'Here you are,' said the newcomer, another big frog, hopping on to the nearest leaf, 'Why aren't you joining in the concert to-night ?'

Madam Frog had scarcely heard the croaking chorus which had begun to fill the surrounding air.

'Oh, my dear,' she exclaimed, 'I'm so terribly depressed. I've had such an afternoon! The most charming gentleman came to visit me, and I am really the most unhappy frog in the world.'

"Well, I don't see why that should depress you so much," said the friend, "tell me all about it, darling, what did he do to make you unhappy?"

And Madam Frog, bursting into tears, told her all about it; only she did not mention having seen the Fairy Lucima.

Next day despair reigned in the ranks of the frogs. One and all they yearned to go to Frogville, and they yearned to go there correctly shod. They had all been told of Madam Frog's interview with the water sprite, and as each one of them was privately convinced that his voice was superior to anyone else's, they all felt strongly that they only had to obtain a hearing at the capital to be acclaimed at once as great singers.

Not a croak was heard in the bog that day, and every frog sat sadly wondering how, what they now felt to be so essential to their happiness, could be brought about.

Madam Frog had already made a plan; her idea, which she was careful not to tell anyone, was to saw

through a waterlily stalk close to the flower, launch the blossom on the river, and float down to the mouth of the great Frogville marshes. It was too far, she thought, to swim, besides the perils from pike and other drawbacks.

There remained the question of shoes, but the means of surmounting that difficulty had already suggested itself the night before.

From where she now sat, trimming and shaping a piece of dried reed stalk to use as a paddle on her voyage down the stream, she had a good view of the fairy's house, and could even see the fairy herself sitting at a window, engaged in mending a landing net which she had made out of last year's skeleton lime tree leaves.

Behind her on the wall an enormous stuffed minnow, fully two inches long or more, bore witness to her greatest angling truimph, and constantly recalled the glorious day, when, after a fight of over half an hour, she had succeeded in landing the monster.

The paddle finished, Madam Frog deposited it in a safe place, and turned to the question of food supply.

She did not know how long the voyage might take, and thought, no doubt, she would be able to capture

some flies on the way downstream, still, they might be difficult to come by, and it was better to take as many as she could with her. She therefore spent the rest of the day in hunting, in the patient frog fashion; and instead of immediately swallowing the insects she caught, as was her usual habit, she carefully packed most of them into empty snail-shells, which she placed in the water-lily boat till it was as full as she thought safe.

She then returned to her former position, from which she could keep watch on the fairy house.

It was a lovely day, hot and still; not a breath of wind stirred the reeds, and the sun shone so fiercely that the frog was glad to keep under the shade of a tuft of rushes. All day she had avoided her husband, nor had she spoken to any of her children; she had, in fact nearly forgotten their existence.

At last the afternoon wore away, and as the evening fell, her patience was rewarded, and she saw the Fairy come out of her house, and, spreading her wings, fly away up the river.

The moment she was out of sight, Madam Frog, with anxious glances from side to side to see that no one was

watching, began to hop cautiously towards the window which Lucima had left so invitingly open. She took advantage of every leaf and blade of grass to conceal her approach; but it was not yet dark, and she ought to have waited longer if she had hoped not to be noticed, for there was all the garden lawn to cross before she could enter the house, and on that level space her movements could not fail to attract attention.

As a matter of fact quite a number of her friends caught sight of her hopping form, and, from vaguely wondering what she was doing in the fairy's garden, were soon watching, with breathless excitement, the shameless burglary that was being carried out before their very eyes.

They saw Madam Frog give an extra large hop and disappear through the open window into the room beyond, and they gazed horrorstruck at this exhibition of lawlessness.

While they were still sitting open-mouthed considering whether they should interfere, or whether after all it was none of their business, Madam Frog was opening cupboards and searching under tables, and in less time than it takes to write, had reappeared at the window

and hopped out again, carrying in the view of all beholders, and with visible exhultation, a pair of red shoes.

Clasping them lovingly to her, she fled to the river bank, under which, in a quiet corner, she had moored her boat; leaping in, she seized the paddle and pushing off vigorously was soon twirling round and round in mid-stream. The lily proved an unwieldy craft to manage at first, but after a few moments she contrived, by using the paddle as a rudder, to keep her head down stream, and soon floated out of sight.

I have no time to tell you now of all the adventures that befel her on the journey, nor of the cruel disappointment which met her, when after undergoing terrible hardships and dangers she at last reached the great marshes; that is a story in itself, and it is only with the Fairy Lucima's experiences in her bog that this one deals.

Imagine her amazement when she came home and found her rooms in such disorder! Madam Frog had not stayed to shut drawers, or to close the lids of boxes, that she had opened in her search, and most of their contents were strewn on the floor.

The fairy could not think whose visit had left such

disturbing traces, or why they should have upset everything in this way.

Theft is so rare a crime in Fairyland that at first it did not occur to her that that could have been the motive, and it was only when during the process of tidying up, she missed the red shoes, that the truth flashed across her. But who could have done it ? For even the worst robbers, such as the rook and the magpie, respect the belongings of the fairies, and it seemed incredible that anyone should have dared to break into her house, and make off with some of her property.

She at once sent for the heron, the bogland policeman, and scolded him severely for allowing such a thing to take place in his district.

He immediately suggested that it had been done by the water sprites, as he knew how angry they were with the fairy for settling so near the river ; but as there was no water within two or three yards of the actual site of the house, and no water sprite could have stood the total absence of it for the time necessary to cross the ground twice, let alone ransack the building into the bargain, that theory had to be abandoned; and he went

off to question the bog people and to try to find some clue.

He did not discover much, as the frogs all hid at his approach.

He was much too apt to make a meal off people of their class to be treated to confidences by any of them.

Fairy Lucima herself was inclined to put the whole thing down to some mischievous hobgoblin, who had strayed as far as the bog; but all enquiries in the underworld only revealed the fact that no hobgoblin had been absent from it at the time of the robbery, as they were all taking part in a tremendous hobgoblin gymkhana which was being held that evening.

In the meantime the weather again turned to rain, and the poor fairy, destitute of shoes, (for she had only possessed one pair which it was her custom to wear out before getting another), was unable to leave the house for two whole days, which worried her dreadfully.

The moment it cleared up she sprang out of the window and flew as fast as she could to Fairytown, where the shops are, never pausing till she reached the doorway of the shoemaker.

'Oh!' she cried to him, as she threw herself ex-

hausted into a spiderweb seat, 'please make me a pair of shoes as quick as you can, shoemaker, for I can't go out fishing again till I've got them!'

'Certainly, my Lady,' replied the old shoemaker, respectfully. 'What will your Ladyship have them made of?'

'Oh anything will do,' said Lucima, 'rose petals, perhaps; yes, I will have red rose petals shoes, like my last ones,'

'If your Ladyship will allow me to advise,' said the the shoemaker, 'I have the very thing for fishing boots, by a lucky accident; a niece of mine was Christmas tree fairy at a human school feast a few months ago, and managed to bring away a piece of orange peel, which your Ladyship will find very much stronger and more waterproof than roseleaf.'

And he produced from the inner recesses of his workshop, a piece of orange peel, carefully prepared and dressed with beeswax.

The fairy was delighted at the idea of such a thick, durable looking skin for her shoes, and at once decided to have them made from it. She begged the old man to finish them as soon as possible, and he promised that

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she should have them the next day. Sure enough they were sent home on the following morning.

The happy fairy lost no time in putting them on, for it was a wet day again, and snatching up her rod and net, she set off to make up for lost time by an extra long fishing expedition.

She splashed her way boldly through the mud, and was overjoyed to find that the orange skin shoes kept out every suspicion of dampness ; she did not notice as she went swinging along over the bog, the dozens of round bulging eyes, that, concealed behind grass and rushes, were fixed, one and all shining green with envy, on her new acquisitions.

The fact of the matter was that the frogs, properly scandalised though they were at first, by the lawless and unprincipled behaviour of Madam Frog, gradually, after much croaking about it to each other, and much reflection on the subject as they sat waiting for the unsuspecting fly to settle within reach, arrived at conclusions very different from their original views of the affair.

'After all,' they were beginning to say to themselves, ' the worst part of our friend's conduct was her

horrible selfishness in stealing, not only the shoes, but a march on us, her nearest and dearest ; and going off as she did, without a word of good-bye to anyone, all by herself, when she ought to have known we were dying to go too ! '

The wicked water sprite, who you may be sure, was fully aware of all that was happening, and was hugging himself for joy at the success of his schemes, paid another visit to the bog, and by the lavish use of more smooth and oily compliments, kept alive that yearning for Frogville which had been so easily instilled.

Some of the vainest of the frogs already said openly that if Madam Frog's voice had really been a remarkable one, like those of some people they could name, for instance, she would have been perfectly justified in borrowing (they no longer spoke of stealing, you will observe), in borrowing, they repeated, the fairy's shoes.

Could she not easily order another pair from the shoemaker ? What more simple ? Whereas it was impossible for a frog to have dealings in Fairytown, or to procure shoes in any way but the method that had been resorted to.

It will not surprise you, such being the direction in

which public opinion was trending, to hear that the very next fine day, no sooner had the fairy flown out of her house, as was her custom in fine weather, than another burglary took place, and the orange skin shoes were seen no more.

The poor fairy was obliged to order some fungus skin ones, as there was no more orange peel to be had, but soon she ceased to care what they were made of, as it turned out to be impossible for her to keep them more than a day. Every new pair she procured vanished like the last, and the thieves soon became so bold, that they would hop in and rob her while she slept.

In vain the police were reinforced by two more herons from higher up the river ; they soon discovered that the frogs had a hand in the business, and actually caught one descending the stream in a lily boat with his toes inserted in a pair of stolen shoes; but though they were not long in disposing of him, the shoes were lost and fell into the water, where a sprite had them in a twinkling, and made off with them while the policemen were still quarrelling as to who should swallow the frog.

A few of them were caught from time to time approaching the house; but there were so many of them,

and by now the determination to have shoes had grown so universal among them, all scruples about taking someone else's property having been thrown to the winds by common consent, that it was impossible for the herons to catch them all, and the shoes continued to go as quickly as they came.

Being fairy shoes, Lucima had wondered at the beginning if they ran away by themselves, but the shoemaker asserted with tears, that he worked such potent spells into them as he made them, that it was out of the question for them even to walk without assistance.

He, poor man, was worked to death ; there was no other shoemaker in the town, and he was at it day and night to provide the fairy with some sort of footgear, and at the same time cater for his other customers.

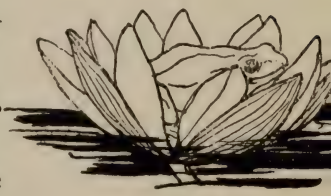
Every fine day Lucima flew to his shop, pursued down the street by naughty little elves who called, 'Ha, ha, Fairy Losemyshoe !' after her, a name which annoyed her very much.

She was often prevented from going fishing now by the failure of a new pair of shoes to appear in time, and what with her disappointments in this respect and the feeling that whenever she went to sleep her house was

invaded by froggy strangers, she was most unhappy and worried.

At last things came to such a pass that the other fairies insisted on taking the whole matter to court, and laying it before the Queen.

Lucima was very reluctant to do this as she was afraid she would be blamed, though really she had done nothing to deserve such disagreeable results, but her friends were firm about it ; so one fine day she accompanied several of them to the royal residence, and asked an audience of Her Majesty.



The Queen received them very graciously, and enquired if any special business brought them to court.

So the eldest fairy related the circumstances to her, as far as they were then known.

'Your Majesty will see,' she concluded, 'that the present state of affairs is a very trying one, and may have far reaching results.'

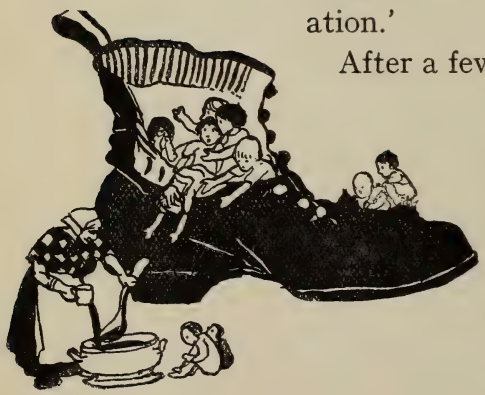
'For instance, Ma'am,' said another fairy, 'Cinderella's family have received an invitation to the Prince's ball. Now, as Your Majesty is aware, I am her godmother, and am expected to see that she is properly dressed, and able to appear on that occasion ; but as

matters stand there is no chance whatever of my being able to obtain her glass slippers, which, as you know, Ma'am, are absolutely *de rigueur*, and the poor dear girl will have to stay at home. Indeed, it is quite likely under the circumstances, that the Prince may marry one of those dreadful minxes, her step-sisters!'

'Puss in Boots was here yesterday,' broke in another; 'his seven league boots are entirely worn out, and unless he gets some new ones immediately, the giants will probably get the best of their encounter with his master. That will be pretty serious!'

'Then the Old Woman who lives in a Shoe, badly requires a larger one. Her family is so numerous that the local authorities have notified her that she must move; it really is not healthy for the babies to sleep at the end of the toe, where they get absolutely no air, as they do at present. And there are many other sad cases, not to mention the general inconvenience to the rest of us.

'We therefore have ventured humbly to bring the matter before your Majesty, and hope that you will be so good as to give the matter your gracious consideration.'



After a few questions, the Queen gave the deputation

leave to withdraw, with instructions to present themselves again the next day ; and on their doing so she addressed them as follows :

'Fairies, we have seriously reflected on the difficulty you spoke of yesterday, and we have come to two decisions.

'One is that you, Lucima, must take up your abode somewhere further from the river and away from the boggy ground, unless you prefer to give up wearing shoes altogether, as in one way or another, we must remove temptation from those poor, ignorant frogs. We sympathise with your natural regret at having to abandon the house you have so lately built, and which we hear is so attractive, and if you decide to erect a new one in a position more remote from the water, we will lend you the assistance of the royal carpenters and masons. And if the situation is not quite convenient for the fishing you are so fond of, at least you will be able to sleep quietly in your bed, and will soon get used to going a little further for your sport.

'Our second decision we can explain to you better in another place.'

And cutting short Lucima's thanks for her kind-

ness, Her Majesty led the way to the royal garden.

Here she paused by an empty flower bed, and bidding the fairies gather round, she waved her wand and uttered a magic word.

Immediately, there sprang from the bare ground a tiny green shoot which grew rapidly larger, putting forth leaves and buds as it grew, till, in less time than it takes to tell, a pretty bush laden with yellow and red flowers stood where brown earth had lain uncovered a moment before.

'This bush, fairies, that we have caused to appear,' said their sovereign, 'will, we hope, solve any remaining difficulty; the flowers, as you see, are of a shape easily adapted to wearing on the foot, and by using them instead of roses or other petals, the shoemaker will be saved most of his work, and be able to provide a practically unlimited amount of shoes.

'Plantations of this flower, which we will name Lady's Slipper, shall be made throughout the Kingdom; and we will at once give orders to our royal gardeners to that effect.'

So saying, the Queen returned to the Palace, having dismissed the fairies, who retired in great satisfaction,

even Lucima feeling that on the whole she was well out of it.

From that day to this the cultivation of the lady-slipper plant has been extensively undertaken all over this part of Fairyland, and, as one of the royal stewards, I was superintending the watering of a patch of it, when I had the pleasure of meeting you."

Fairy Sparkle ceased speaking, and Nancy, who had been listening with all her ears, heaved a sigh.

"What a nice story!" she said, "thank you so much for telling it to me. But what did happen to the frogs in Frogville?"

The boy beside her did not answer for a moment; he was looking past her with a dreamy expression in his eyes, and did not seem to hear what she said. She repeated the question, and he turned to her again, but did not reply. Instead, he looked at her with an air of amusement and began to sing softly:

"Oh, Nancy, Nancy,
You take my fancy!"

then broke off suddenly and sprang up;

"Some other day, perhaps;" was all he said, and then with a bow and a wave of his hand, he flew away, smiling at her over his shoulder as he disappeared.

## CHAPTER VIII

# THE POND

ANCY could not get the story that the fairy boy had told her out of her head. All the next day she pondered over it and wondered what happened to the wicked frogs on the river and what adventures they met with on the Great Marshes, so that several times when her nurse or other grownup spoke to her, she was so much absorbed in these problems that she did not hear or answer them, till they fell to asking each other: "What was the matter with the child?" And saying that she, "Did not seem herself."

Nancy wished she could go down the river bank, and see if she could find out anything from some of the frogs who must still be left there, but it was a long way from the house to the water and she knew she would never be allowed to go alone.

Whenever she had a chance, she ran to the orchard, and looked everywhere for a sign of the fairy gardeners, but not one could she see.

So she passed the next few days, till one afternoon her mother came and fetched her from the nursery, saying she might come out driving in the motor with her.

Nancy danced happily down the stairs beside her, chattering gaily, but as they passed a window she stopped, and pointed to a large car which was tearing up the drive towards the door.

"Look, Mummy," said she, "that isn't our motor, is it?" "Are we going in a new one?"

Her mother glanced out, and paused too.

"Oh, Nancy!" she exclaimed, "that is the Cornborough motor! I quite forgot that Lily Cornborough said she was coming over to see me to-day. I am afraid we shan't be able to have our drive now, darling, but never mind! Will you run out into the garden and play about for half an hour by yourself, and then I will come to you, and perhaps later on we can go out in the car after all."

"Very well, Mummy," said Nancy, trying not to

show her disappointment, and she took off her thick motoring coat and laid it on a chair in the hall ; then, as her mother, with a final "That's right! and mind you are very good. And don't go out of the garden!" hurried off to welcome the visitors, she slipped out of a side door and into the garden.

There, her precious possessions, the magic feather and the acorn, held as usual in her pocket, she wandered about, peering under flowers and in green places for fairies, but did not find the trace of one ; it was no doubt too early in the day to look for them in the sunny garden, and presently she left it and went off towards the woods.

"There is lots of time," she said to herself, "to go back before Mummy is ready."

She had quite forgotten that she had been told not to leave the garden. . . . . .

The blackbird's nest was empty and deserted now, and as she passed through the little glade where she had spent such happy times with them, it appeared very silent and lonely, and she hurried on, for it seemed to her that she heard a blackbird's whistle sounding faintly from far ahead. She quickly came to the road

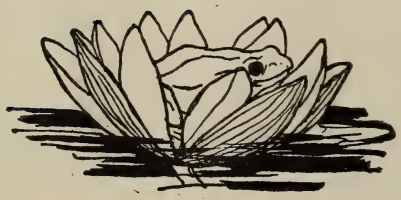
above which her nurse used to sit while she played, and, with a feeling of adventure, crossed it, and followed the path into the wood on the other side, where she had never been before.

Here, too, all was still and quiet under the hot afternoon sun, and the air was close and stifling even in the shady depths of the thicket. She wandered on, the path twisting and turning before her, till she heard a tinkling sound, and came suddenly on a little stream meandering beneath the trees.

"This must go to the river," thought she, and began to run down the path, which now led along the bank. Soon she caught the glare of light reflected from a broad surface, and came out on the margin of a wide stretch of water.

It was not the river, as she soon saw, but a place where the stream widened into a small lake or large pond, entirely surrounded with trees, and lying clear and green in the sunshine.

Nancy drew a long breath ; here, she thought, there must surely be some frogs who would know about Frogville, and what the robber frogs found there. And she proceeded to search among the rushes at the water's



edge; but for a while could find none, though from time to time as she went along, she heard a splash in front of her, which she felt sure was caused by the hurried plunge of one of those she sought.

"How stupid I am," said she, presently, "of course they are frightened of me when I am so big."

And quickly she turned her magic acorn and spoke the magic word.

"Now that's better," she said, when she was two or three inches tall; and turned again to her hunting.

Soon, peeping between the rushes on the very brink of the pool, she caught a glimpse of something moving close to her, and looking again, felt sure she saw a brown form, half hidden from view by a flowering weed that here covered the surface of the water.

"Frog!" she called softly, "Oh Frog! I see you! Do come and talk to me!"

There was a stirring among the weeds, and then, as Nancy watched, there appeared a face; a little pointed mischievous face, which peered at her over a leaf.

"I am no frog," it said, and stared hard at the child.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" cried Nancy, "I only saw

something move, and I didn't know it was you. Who are you ?"

"I am just one of the kelpies of the pond," replied the owner of the face. He had a hard, tinkling little voice which you might easily have mistaken for the ripple of a wavelet against a stone.

"What are you ?" he asked.

"My name is Nancy," said she, "I am a little mortal girl, you know."

"Are you indeed ?" exclaimed the kelpie in more lively tones. "I never, never saw one so small. The only mortal who comes here, as a rule, is called Cooper, and he is a very large sort of creature, quite different from you. Are you really certain you are a mortal ?"

"Yes," said Nancy, "I am really ; I am only small sometimes, because the Dryad taught me how to change my size."

"The Dryad!" repeated the kelpie in a disgusted voice, "I hate all Dryads. They are cousins of the Naiads, who are the most tiresome, interfering people, and never let anyone have any fun. And the Dryads are worse, or would be if they could get at one. Why, we never dare go near the bank where there's a tree

growing, or out they pounce with their absurd rules and regulations! However, luckily even the Naiads are asleep to-day. They don't like this nice, warm sun and the sparkling shinyness that dances on the water. It makes them blink, the stupid things! So we can do what we like this afternoon, anyway! Come for a swim?"

He emerged from behind a leaf and perched himself on a flower stalk; his little brown body was wrapped in clinging weeds, and his greenish brown hair fell damp and limp round his face. Two piercing eyes were fixed on Nancy's, and he held out a hand encouragingly.

"I am afraid I can't swim," she admitted reluctantly.

"I'll soon teach you," he cried, "come along. You don't know how cool and fresh it is under water!"

Nancy hesitated; the pool looked very green and inviting, but so large and deep and mysterious. What was there down in that clear darkness? she wondered, and felt a little frightened of exploring those unknown shadows.

"It is very kind of you, but I don't think I will," she said; "my nurse would be angry with me if I got my frock wet."

But she knew in her heart that this was not the true reason.

It was the kelpie who looked angry then.

"Oh, very well," he said sulkily. "Good-bye!" and he dived off into the deep water.

Nancy hadn't expected this, and was aghast to see him disappear.

"Come back, come back!" she called after him, "can't we play at something else?"

All was silent for a moment and she was afraid he would not return; and then, in a twinkling, there he popped up again among the water-flowers.

"I'll tell you what," said he, "I'll take you out in a boat. You get on to that log, and I'll push you about on the water!"

He pointed to a short, stumpy piece of stick that had drifted in under the bank close to where Nancy stood.

"Jump aboard!" he cried.

The stick didn't look very steady, but it would never do to annoy him again, thought the child, as she climbed on to it, and balanced herself in the fork of a branching twig.

In a minute the kelpie had pushed the craft away

from the bank, and they were floating out on the broad waters of the pond. Very wide they looked to Nancy now, from her precarious position and her diminished size; but certainly it was great fun, and a tremendous adventure.

The kelpie swam easily behind the log, giving it a push forward from time to time, and talking as he swam.

So they proceeded, till they were nearly in the middle of the pond.

There he paused and let the boat float free.

"Now," said he, "you can admire the scenery, while I go and speak to a friend." And he swam off, laughing as if he had made a joke.

It was very pleasant on the water, the sun was getting lower so that the heat was not too intense, and the murmur of the little ripples as they lapped over the edge of the stick, was musical and soothing.

Nancy was very content to sit for a while and enjoy the novelty of the adventure. A swarm of tadpoles surrounded her, all asking questions at once, and wiggling their tails frantically in the attempt to get the front places.

"Who are you ?"

"Where did you come from ?"

"Are you going to stay long ?"

"How will you ever get back ?"

"Who told you to come ?"

Thus they shouted, over and over again, and never paused for an answer.

Nancy wanted to ask them where the frogs, their parents, where, but it was impossible to get a word in, and presently the approach of a big fish sent them all wriggling away.

The fish swam round and round the stick with his eyes fixed on the child, but not a word did he say in reply to her efforts at making friends. He looked very large, so very much bigger than she was ; he had a long head with a turned up snout, and an enormous mouth full of big, sharp looking teeth all slanting backwards, and he looked at Nancy with an expression she didn't a bit like.

"I wish the kelpie would come back," she thought ; but there was no sign of him; and the fish continued to circle silently round her, always keeping a little way off, however, which was a comfort.

There was very little current in the middle of the pond, and the log drifted very slowly.

"Still," she thought, "it does move, and we shall get to the bank sometime, even at this rate."

But the shore seemed very far away, and by now the sun was sinking behind the trees, and, in the falling light, everything took on a strange and more alarming aspect.

What a long time it was since she had run out into the garden! She only now remembered that she was to have waited there for her Mother. Were they wondering where she was? Perhaps hunting for her? Yes, surely! And she had had no tea. She never remembered having had no tea before! What a wicked, cruel face the fish had! And why did he not say anything? If she turned the acorn and grew big again the stick would sink, but if the fish attacked her she would have to do that.

And then, she supposed she would be drowned.

It was with the greatest joy that at last she saw the kelpie returning. He was not alone.

With him came three others just like him, and two different little creatures dressed in blue and green, with very white arms and legs; they were water pixies.

"Here it is!" called out the first kelpie, as they swam up, "here is the mortal! Have a good look at her Hasn't she got a funny pink face!" and he went off into fits of laughter.

"Look at her yellow hair!" cried another. "What a colour! Ha! Ha! Ha!" and they all laughed and pointed.

Nancy tried to pretend not to notice their rudeness, but she was horror struck by the change in the kelpie's manner to her.

"Won't you take me back to the shore, please?" she said to him, as politely as she could. "It's time I went home, if you don't mind,"

"No, no, now I've got you, I keep you!" said the kelpie; "some of us keep tame tadpoles, or newts, or minnows, but it will be much more exciting to have a pet human. Isn't she amusing?" he went on, turning to his friends; "don't you all envy me?"

"But I don't want to be your pet, thank you very much," said poor Nancy. "I want to go home to my Mother. Please, please let me go!"

But the kelpies took no more notice of anything she said.

They kept on swimming about near her, laughing and making personal remarks in a very rude, vulgar way, and at last, the poor little girl, getting more and more frightened, ended by bursting into tears.

"Now, she's getting wet," remarked one of the pixies, as he watched the teardrops streaming down her face with great satisfaction, "it was about time, too. It made me quite uncomfortable to look at anything so dry."

Nancy felt so angry with him for saying this that she stopped crying, and was comforted to see his disappointment. However, it was shortlived comfort, for the pixie called out in a rage :

"She's getting quite dry again !" and dashing at the log, caught hold of her feet, and tried to pull her off her slippery seat.

"Let's take her down to the depths !" he shouted. "I can't bear her up here! Help me, you others!" and he tugged as hard as he could. The rest came up at his call, and willingly joined him in his efforts to get Nancy into the water.

She clung to the stick with all her might, and screamed for help at the top of her voice, but as that always

shrank in proportion when she became small herself, it did not sound very loud, even when raised to its utmost; and she felt that the chance of attracting attention was almost hopeless.

She was stronger than the water people, but there were six of them, and though she kicked and struggled bravely, they were too many for her, and soon she was tugged into the water, and felt little hands grasping her from all sides, and pulling her down . . . . down. . . .

Still she held on to the stick, but her strength was failing, and she knew now that in another minute she would have to leave go, and then . . . . Oh! then! there would be no more hope of escape.

She had not enough breath left to scream, and clung silently, but her hands were being slowly dragged from their hold. Everything began to get misty . . . and she was only conscious of one feeling, that she must not let go! Vaguely she was aware of a sound of wings flapping on the water, but it seemed to come from very far away, and she hardly noticed it; and then, suddenly she no longer felt the kelpies arms about her.

It seemed as if they had all let go, and she was floating lightly on the lake, her hands, no longer capable of a

firm grasp, rested inert on the stick. She was too tired and exhausted even to wonder what was happening, and stayed quite still, content not to have to struggle any more for the time being.

Gradually, as she recovered, she became aware of what was going on round her ; a tremendous fluttering of wings and splashing of water, and the hasty dashing to and fro of large whirling shapes. It made her feel giddy again, and she shut her eyes and lay quiet.

Presently the noise died away, and after a moment voices sounded close to her, and she looked up into the face of a fat moorhen, which gazed anxiously at her own. Behind it on every side she could see the floating forms of other moorhens.

"Have they killed her ?" one of them was saying, and the nearest one answered it quickly :

"No, no, she is opening her eyes. You're better now, my dear aren't you?" it continued, addressing Nancy.

"Another minute and those nasty little sprites would have dragged you down and drowned you, stupid little things ! They think everyone can live under water like themselves. Now get on my back, and I'll take you to a safer place than this, for if I am not mistaken, they

have gone to call up the pike to help them, so we have no time to lose!"

Nancy made a feeble effort to climb up on the bird's back, but as soon as she put her arms up, down went her head, and she began to sink, spluttering and choking.

In a moment the moorhen dived underneath her and caught her on its back, coming to the surface again before any harm was done; though the child, coughing and panting, was glad enough to find herself lying on the soft warm feathers.

"Are you all right?" said the moorhen. "Hold tight!" and she swam rapidly away, the other birds closing up, and forming a sort of guard round her.

In a very short time they reached a small island that stood near the middle of the pool, and stopped near the edge of it where an overhanging branch dipped its end into the water. Here was an old moorhen's nest built firmly on the end of a bough, of interwoven rushes and grass, and raised high and solid above the water.

"Hold tight round my neck!" said the bird, and as Nancy obeyed, fluttered up to the nest and deposited her in it.

"That's all right," she said with a sigh of relief, "you

are safe enough here, and here you can stay ; it is lucky that we were within call, and in time to save you from those horrid little kelpies and pixes. Nasty mischievous little things, they are, always up to some tiresome trick, and we were very glad to be able to take you from them. But how did you ever come to be there among them in the middle of the pond ?"

Nancy related her adventures to the moorhens who listened with many ejaculations of sympathy, and she ended by thanking them all very heartily for their timely help.

This filled the modest birds with confusion, and with awkward murmurings of "Not at all," and "Don't mention it !" they one by one departed, leaving only the owner of the nest, who hastened to change the subject.

"The kelpies," said she, "are getting past all bearing. And whether it is from thoughtlessness, or stupidity, or heartless malice, they are beginning to make life on the water a perfect burden ! Only this summer I successfully reared a family of five without losing one, till they were nearly old enough to look after themselves ; and then one day, when my back was turned for an instant,

one of these odious little creatures must needs take it into his head to entice them all down to the big stone where the grandfather of all the pike lies. I needn't tell you that they were never seen again. Of course one expects to lose some of them to the pike, but all five! And on one day! Poor little dears!" and the moorhen shed a great tear at the thought of her babies.

"The wicked, wicked kelpies!" cried Nancy, "I never knew they were so hateful! All your poor little children! Oh, Mrs. Moorhen, I am so sorry! And now are you left all alone?"

"Oh well," returned the bird, "I raised another family soon afterwards (I generally have more than one brood in the course of the summer, you know), and two of them survived and grew up, and I hardly see them now. But quite as often as I want to. One doesn't wish to have to provide for all the fledglings one may hatch. Why if they all had lived and never left me, I assure you there wouldn't be room to move on this pond anywhere. No, I'm not grumbling at the usual course of events, but there is a limit; and I say that limit is reached, when, after I have safely brought my chicks up to a certain age, and kept them out of the way

of rats and foxes, and taught them to keep themselves out of the way of pike, they end by being lured to their deaths by people who ought to know better. I shall see the Naiads about it to-morrow, and try and get them to take steps."

She said this with an air of injured solemnity which Nancy felt boded no good to the kelpies, and she hoped sincerely that the steps taken by the Naiads would be painful ones for those little imps, for surely they deserved severe punishment. She was rather shocked, however, by the cool way the moorhen assumed that most of her children must perish in any case, and she didn't quite know what to say.

"What a nice little nest this is," she remarked after a pause, thinking it better to speak of something else. "Did you build it all yourself?"

"Mr. Moorhen helped," said the bird, "at least he really only got in the way, but he thought he was helping, you know. You can see his white tail bobbing about over there. That's him. It was my idea building it here, and a nice, safe spot it is. You see this branch floats on the water, so that if there's a flood, up we go with it, and no danger of the eggs getting wet. And at

the same time, very little fear of trouble from the shore. No surprise visits from foxes here ! I used to make my nest in the rushes on the mainland over there, but it wasn't a good place."

There was a pause ; the moorhen fell to pruning herself, and rearranged some feathers that had become disordered in the recent struggle. Nancy lay still and gazed out on the still face of the waters before her.

How quiet everything seemed now ! One could hardly believe that all round her in those calm depths, were enemies ; savage pike amd impish kelpies, only waiting for a chance to do her mischief.

The sun had quite gone down, and the shore could scarcely be seen in the gathering dusk ; over head the sky shone pale, and green rather than blue, with one star, at first faintly seen, then quickly growing large and distinct. Even as she looked another followed, and another and another, till you could almost hear the heavenly doors shutting behind them as they hurried out.

Away over the trees to the west, a clear, yellow glow still lingered, as if the sun were in two minds whether really to go or not ; but presently it too, sank down

HOW QUIET EVERYTHING SEEMED

among the branches that stood up so black and intricately thick against the night. A harsh cry sounded from the other side of the lake; Mrs. Moorhen lifted her head, and replied in the same tones.

"You must excuse me now," she said, "if I leave you. You are quite safe here, and I must see about getting my supper."

"Must I stay here?" asked Nancy timidly. "I am rather frightened. The lake is getting so dark, and the kelpies might come back."

"Oh, they can't reach you here," said the moorhen.

"But I ought to go home," said Nancy, "it is so late, nearly dark, and they will not know where I am. Could you be very, very kind and carry me to the shore?"

"Can you find your way home in the night?" enquired the bird; "very well, then. Up you get! On my back once more! Hoop la!"

Nancy scrambled on to the broad feathered back, and lay down with her arms round the moorhen's throat.

"Not too tight, or you'll strangle me," said the bird, as with flapping wings she jumped off the nest, and after half running, half flying along the surface of the pond for a little way, rose into the air and flew swiftly to the shore.

"I'll take you part of the way home," she said; and flying higher through the tree trunks, threaded her way in and out between the boughs, in spite of the darkness, without pause or hesitation till she reached the blackbird's glade in the further wood.

There Nancy was set down safely on the path, and was bidding the bird farewell, when lights appeared twinkling and swinging towards them, and the moorhen flew hurriedly away.

Nancy searched in her wet pocket for the magic acorn.

She had only just regained her proper size when the lights became larger and nearer, and she heard voices, among them her Father's, calling her name. She ran down the path, and in a moment was in the midst of a small party of men, whose figures loomed big and black in the circle of light thrown by the lanterns they carried.

As she stood dazzled, a form detached itself from the rest, and in another second she was in her Mother's arms, being hugged and scolded, questioned and kissed, all at once.

"Oh, Nancy, Nancy, where have you been?" said her Father's voice. "You dreadful child, you have given us all a nice fright."

"I really couldn't help it," said Nancy, "at least I could have of course, if I hadn't gone to the pond," she added truthfully, "but then you know, the kelpies prevented me from coming back, and I forgot about it too, till the fish came. And afterwards they pulled me in. But the moorhens drove them away and I'm all right now, you see, But I am very sorry you were frightened."

Not much attention was paid to this incoherent explanation, for Nancy's mother had suddenly realised how wet she was.

"You have fallen in the pond?" she exclaimed. "Why, yes, your clothes are soaking! Never mind how it happened now, the thing is to get you home and to bed before you are chilled through! Luckily the night is so warm, that I hope it may not harm you. You say the fish pulled you in? You were trying to reach them, and leant too far over the bank, I suppose. It's a mercy you weren't drowned, anyhow!"

"Well, come now quickly," said Nancy's Father. "Take your Mummy's hand and mine, and we will run, so that you get warm."

And off they ran, wasting no more time in talking,

so that in a shorter time than it takes to write about it, they reached the house and the nursery, where they found Nancy's nurse, newly returned from fruitless searchings, and now indulging in a flood of tears, which gave place to mingled smiles and reproaches at the sight of the little girl, but which were yet only half dry upon her cheeks by the time Nancy was snug and warm between the blankets, so quickly did her Mother pull off her clothes and pop her into bed.

"You shall tell me all about it to-morrow, darling," she said; and the tired child, with a murmur of good-night, closed her eyes, and in a very few minutes, drifted into dreamland.

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